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THE VOICE OF
THE SOUTH

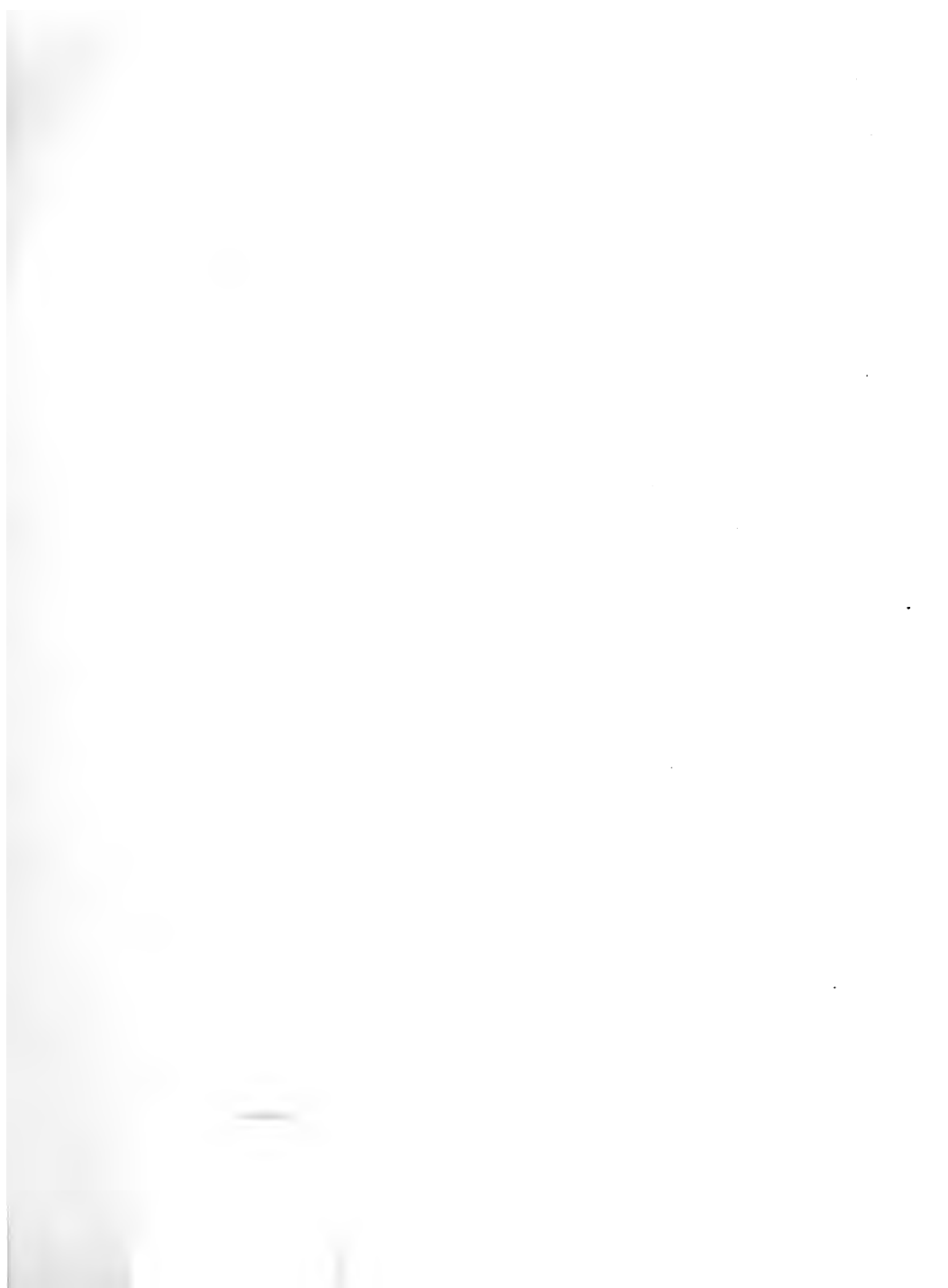


GILBERT WATSON



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THE VOICE OF THE SOUTH

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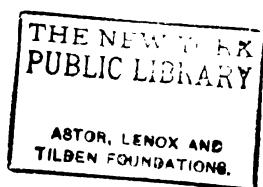
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El Kantara—The Gateway of the Desert.

[*Frontispiece.*

THE VOICE OF THE SOUTH

BY

GILBERT WATSON

Author of "Three Rolling Stones in Japan," &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY ALEARDO AND A. J. ENGEL-TERZI

LONDON

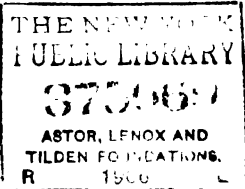
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THE VOICE OF THE SOUTH.

CHAPTER I.

ENTER ATHMAN.

It was during my stay at Biskra, the little desert town of Southern Algeria, that I made the acquaintance of Athman. A fellow traveller, with whom I had exchanged experiences, was loud in his praise, having, as he informed me, employed him as guide in many expeditions into the interior. The more I heard of Athman the more desirous I became to see him, for it appeared that he was at once an Arab and a negro, a poet and a musician, a dandy and an unsophisticated child of nature.

Nor was curiosity alone responsible, for, having a mind to cross the Algerian Sahara, I had been for some time on the outlook for a guide, who would not only discharge his duty in that capacity, but would also supply me with companionable interest. I congratulated myself heartily. Here, it seemed to me, was the very man of whom I had been in search.

I was in my bedroom when his knock sounded

on the door. Making his appearance, and closing the door carefully behind him, he stood before me in an attitude of respectful attention. I looked at him with interest. His character of Arab dandy was well supported, for he was dressed with scrupulous neatness, in carefully chosen colours, and an almost fastidious cleanliness both of person and attire. Yellow slippers, white socks, six inches of bare black legs, loose trousers made of a single shawl-like garment caught between the legs, and fastened round the waist with a scarlet sash ; white cloth jacket opening wide and revealing a waistcoat of pale blue colour, adorned with embroidery, and fastened with a row of gleaming metal buttons ; a red fez worn with an air of youthful jauntiness—such was his appearance.

Despite the strong suspicion of negro ancestry visible in his features, the form of his skull, and his eyes, which were large and dark, betrayed his indebtedness to Arab progenitors. His fine figure and erect carriage arrested the attention.

“ Your name is Athman ? ” I observed in French.

“ Alouï Athman Ben Salah, at your service,” he replied in the same language. As he spoke he bowed slightly. I was struck with the gracefulness of the movement.

“ Where did you learn French ? ” I inquired.

“ I learned it long ago, Sidi ; but, yes, I have known French ever since I was so high.” He held out a dark hand, palm downwards, some four feet from the ground. On the forefinger of his right hand he wore a silver ring set with a blue stone.

"How old are you, Athman?"

"Twenty-four, Sidi."

"Well, I intend to travel across the Algerian Sahara. Will you be my guide?"

His eyes brightened.

"It will be a pleasure," he murmured.

"It is your country, I understand?"

"Yes, it is my country. I was born in the village of Zaouiat Ribah of the Oued Rir. My great-grandfather was Marabout."

It is impossible to tell of the blend of modest simplicity and conscious pride with which he imparted the information.

"Marabout?" I questioned.

"Oh, but a very, very holy man, Sidi; and as for my great-grandfather, he was a saint, even among Marabouts. His tomb stands quite near to the village. Its dome is like a little snowflake when the sun shines on it. It is whitewashed every year—he was so holy a man. Ah, Sidi, it is a long time since I have seen this dear tomb, for I was very young when my mother and I left Zaouiat Ribah."

He sighed, and adjusted the folds of his voluminous trousers with a pensive air; the stone of his ring made a little blue light in the room.

"I suppose you have almost forgotten it?" I remarked. "One forgets and is forgotten when one can no longer be seen."

He raised a hand in protest.

"Do not believe it, Sidi. It is so easy to remember those we love. As for me, I have an aunt, and an uncle, and many cousins still living in our

village ; they have not forgotten me, of that I am quite sure. Sometimes I send them a purse, or it may be a sash, or a tie ; some little thing of no value, you understand ; and then I get word back to say that they are well. Oh, I am by no means forgotten."

He shook his head with much energy. Then, his voice becoming dreamy, and his eyes assuming a far-off look, he continued :

"And our oasis, too ; I remember every part of it ; yes, I could lead you about it with closed eyes. One old tree hangs over the village lake and looks at itself in the water. One of its branches hangs down like a withered arm. I remember even the way the sunlight falls—which stems it touches at noon, and which at evening. *Tiens !* it is strange how much one remembers ; it is bright within my mind as—as a picture."

I gazed at him in astonishment. The traveller was right. This was no ordinary guide. Yet, even accepting his unusual superiority, how came this son of Africa to soar to a knowledge of pictures ? He noted my surprise with pleasure. There was something peculiarly attractive about his smile ; it was so boyish, so bright, and withal so unexpected. It revealed possibilities of cheerful companionship hitherto undreamed of. So much the better. I looked into his face and found myself smiling in pure sympathy.

"Tell me," I said, "how come you to know anything of pictures ?"

"I have visited Paris, Sidi, for the great Exhi-

bition. I went with an English gentleman who has shown me much kindness. *Mon Dieu !* it was gay. We went to a great house, I forget its name ; every wall was covered with pictures. One of them was of—what do you think ?—why, the desert. Judge if I was not excited !” He chuckled merrily, then added : “ He had much difficulty in getting me away from that picture.”

I changed the conversation by alluding to his poetry. He drew himself up. His manner was full of simple dignity.

“ Yes, Sidi, I am a poet. An Arab poet. Everyone knows me. But ”—and a doubt stole into his face—“ does the Sidi like poetry ?”

I confessed to appreciating good poetry. The doubt vanished. Impulsively he stretched forth his hand. To my astonishment I found myself grasping it.

“ I am glad,” he cried, “ very glad. I was so afraid you would say ‘ No,’ and to travel in the desert with someone who did not like poetry would be a pity. You see, the desert is a great poem—sometimes sad, sometimes gay, but always beautiful.”

“ What do you expect for your services ?” I inquired.

“ For my services.” As he repeated the words an expression came into his honest black face which I can only describe as professional. It was as though the Arab guide whispered worldly wisdom into the ears of the negro child.

“ I am a good guide,” he began slowly, glancing

at me the while with the evident intention of marking the effects of his words. "A far better guide than Selim or Achmet. I do not run after every newcomer. No ; I wait always till clients come to me. It is more dignified. I will take the Sidi to Tougourt. I know it like my pocket. I will introduce him to all my friends—gentlemen of much importance. My services are worth much money. The Sidi will find that I am no ordinary guide. I am a great Arab——"

I stopped the flow of words.

"I asked a question, Athman."

He acknowledged the reproof with geniality.

"Without doubt the Sidi is right. He is a rich and generous Englishman. I leave the affair in his hands."

He took a backward step and folded his arms. There was something imposing, almost statuesque, in his appearance.

For some moments I turned the matter over without speaking. Then I offered him a small daily sum of money with the promise of a gift at parting. He listened to me with whimsical perplexity, his strong black fingers toying with the embroidery on his jacket.

"Well," I questioned, "are you not satisfied ?"

"Y-e-s, certainly. It is only—but, no, the Sidi will think badly of me if——"

I reassured him, upon which he spoke without further hesitation.

"What size of a present will it be ?"

"That depends."

"If you are content?"

"Yes."

"If you are not very content a little present—and if you are very content, a great present?"

"Precisely."

He rubbed his hands again. His white teeth shone.

"Then it will be a great present," he cried joyously.

"And now, Athman, I wish to start as soon as possible."

"Certainly, Sidi." He made a rapid calculation on his fingers. "In two days it can be done. There are camels to seek, and a tent, and——"

I interrupted him with a gesture.

"I will have nothing to do with details," I remonstrated; "I leave all that to you. From this moment you are my guide, and if you are a good guide you will relieve me of responsibility."

He chuckled merrily.

"*C'est ça!* you will be much relieved. I will surprise you delightfully. I understand that. I, too, love to be delightfully surprised. I will arrange all. Oh, you may trust me!"

Nodding his red fez many times, and beaming upon me with the air of one already deep in my confidence, he left the room.

CHAPTER II.

FAREWELL TO BISKRA.

LIGHTLY Biskra shook off the dreams of the tropical night. The white walls of her houses showed like blanched faces in the dawn—silent as fire-worshippers awaiting the sun. The fringe of palms facing the East stole on the sight, pale as phantoms, motionless, their drooping leaves awash with silver. Behind the town, the oasis massed itself in impenetrable obscurity. Far off, a neutral tinted line spoke of the desert.

Day after day had this line beckoned to me, decking itself in elemental jewels like a syren seeking to please. And it was not only to the material eye that it appealed, but to that infinitely more subtle sense, the eye of imagination. That pencilled line known as the horizon had been to me a daily source of wonder and speculation. Could I but reach it! Could I but see beyond it! What golden lands lost in sunlight might I not discover. A sense of mystery, almost of awe, as though one stood within the doors of some great cathedral, held anticipation breathless.

It is not that which we see in life, but that which we hope to see, that causes the heart to beat and the

eyes to sparkle. To my ears the word "desert" sounded magical as did "fairy-land" when I was a child; a name to conjure with, picturing forth a land full of delightful possibilities, a world of wonder shining in a heaven of dreams. And I was to see it at last!

Athman had proved himself an efficient organizer. I found myself master of three camels—two as mounts for my guide and myself, the third to be used exclusively for baggage. I beamed upon them with an air of happy proprietorship. To possess camels was to my mind a fall of fortune almost too good to be true. To be able to say "come," and have three camels coming; and to be able to say "go" and have three camels going, appeared to me the height of human bliss—envy itself could not reach higher. The only crumpled rose-leaf in my bed of satisfaction lay in the fact that Abdullah, the real owner of my perambulating property, trudged in our rear, and also that the camels themselves appeared to regard me with considerable suspicion.

As we moved away, my thoughts reverted to my introduction to this new world, when on a beautiful afternoon, scarce a week ago, I had caught my first glimpse of the desert. It was an experience I was little likely to forget, and now that I was actually embarked on the high sea of sand, my memory rested on that salient moment with conscious pleasure. El-Kantara, the gate-way to the desert, lay before me—the beautiful golden gate which many a traveller has delighted to extol.

Behind, in the desolate valleys, the hot metal of the gauge winks defiance to the African sun—a sterile and unproductive land baring its nakedness to the day—but in front, the semi-circle of cliffs is rent in twain as though a Titan's axe had cleft their granite bones, leaving the wound a subject of marvel to all eternity. And, gazing through this giant gate over a blur of sunlit oasis, one sees the desert.

Another scene, too, connected inseparably with that radiant afternoon returned to me. Standing in the river-bed of the Oued-Biskra with my back towards the desert I had looked northwards. Among the boulders that mirrored themselves in the stream were two Arab boys. Overhead, a palm-tree bent above the water and gazed at itself in the little pools that lay arrested among the rocks. In the background the scene opened, not with the sheer abruptness, the brusque violence, of the cleft as seen from El-Kantara, but with a gentle suavity of introduction, leading the eye along shining water-ways, between lines of palms, onwards, upwards, to where, in the blue of the distance, the hills slept in a mantle of sunbeams.

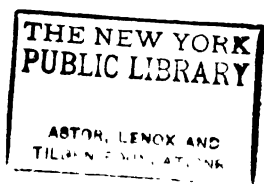
Slowly we left Biskra behind us. Life was beginning to awake in the drowsy streets—a dog crept from under a clump of aloes, a child watched us from behind a cactus hedge—while overhead in the clear spaces of the sky a band of swallows wheeled ceaselessly.

As we passed the negro village we met an Arab mounted on a diminutive donkey, driving two



An Arab mounted on a diminutive donkey.

[To face page 10.]



other donkeys before him. As the twelve tiny hoofs pattered along the lane, the dust rose in dense clouds. It obscured the distance, it veiled the bamboo hedge, it shrouded the little party in a diaphanous mist of silver. There was something extremely dainty in the diminutive animals and their dusky owner. Seen thus in the dim light, they resembled silver-point drawings, mere indications of life, silhouettes sketched with a wet and speedy brush on a background of pearl.

Silently we stalked forward. The sponge-like feet of the camels and the sandals of the Arab passed inaudibly over the dusty ground. Gradually the desert opened out before us. It dawned upon the sight from between faint headlands of verdure. To the right Alia and Filiah—two small oases—showed like islands of misty greenery floating in a sea of pale grey light. Volcanic rocks suggesting the action of primeval fires, lay tossed around, interspersed with dwarf bushes powdered with silver dust. The camels avoided these obstacles with the leisurely grace of movement peculiar to them—swaying their long necks pendulously and placing their feet with care on the level ground between the ruts. The air was exquisitely cool and clear—its purity, freshness, and faint odour, as of thyme, breathed of infinite space. A sense of solemn expectancy pervaded the scene. In the far distance a herd of camels was to be observed. At times they appeared but as slowly moving dots, and at others they stood out hard and sharp against the sky line.

Once we met a family proceeding Biskra-wards. They attracted the eye from afar on account of the glint of colour that focussed attention. I gazed at them as we approached, gazed as we passed, turned in my saddle and gazed again as they receded into the distance. It seemed to me that I could not gaze my fill, that the time taken in the encounter was all too short to sear them upon my memory, so picturesquely did they stand out in trenchant contrast to their surroundings. Foremost came an Arab mounted on a donkey. He was clad in a burnous of a dirty grey colour, the hood of which partially concealed his face. His long and naked legs dangled but a couple of inches above the dust of the road. He returned my stare with a look of utter indifference. Behind him paced a camel laden with sacks, cooking utensils, and baskets. Perched high upon those family gods were two semi-naked children clutching a couple of fowls. Over the camel's body, in lieu of a saddle-cloth, trailed a parti-coloured sheet of alternate red and yellow stripes. In the rear plodded a woman dressed in an orange robe, a baby bound upon her back. When we were come within a few yards of her she raised her head. Her eyes fell on us with a dull unmeaning stare as though she had long since ceased to take interest in objects beyond the pale of her sad and sordid life. She gave us but a fleeting glance to enable her to avoid us, then her eyes drooped again to the dust. She was unveiled and of pitiable plainness ; a face old before its time, seamed with many wrinkles.

She walked with a limp ; one naked foot, partially covered with a bandage, showed signs of blood, and her air was the air of one both despondent and weary. The child upon her back wailed, but she had no time to still its cries, for already the steady advance of the animals had left her many yards behind. Slowly they crept into the distance ; the donkey picking its way daintily among the ruts, the camel with stately motion and outstretched neck, the woman limping with bent back and down-cast eyes.

The sun rose and deluged the plains with light. Barely had his upper rim showed in a line of fire above the horizon than at a cry from their master the camels came to a stand-still. The man strode forward and hanging on to the neck of Athman's mount brought the animal to its knees.

"It is the hour of prayer," said Athman.

I watched them as my camel cropped the terebinth shrubs by the way-side—watched them with a feeling of alienation, conscious that from their spiritual world, from their inner life, I was indeed an outcast, destined to remain for ever in an atmosphere of semi-comprehension.

Athman's love of finery revealed itself even in his devotions. He unfastened a parcel from behind his saddle which, when unrolled, proved to be a small praying-rug. This he spread on the ground—not on the track where the dust lay deep, but on the higher and firmer ground among the shrubs. Discarding his burnous and kicking off his yellow slippers, he stepped in his white socks on to the mat

and stood erect. At the distance of a couple of yards, with naked feet, stood Abdullah. The contrast between them was striking. The one with dark, rough-hewn face and splendid figure, the other with fine Arab features, his weather-worn frame gaunt to emaciation—the one in a pale-mauve costume lined with crimson, his jacket stiff with embroidery and bright with rows of glass buttons, the other covered only with a grey burnous, ragged and dirty beyond words.

I watched them prostrating themselves until their foreheads touched the ground, rising to their full height, prostrating themselves anew, and gave ear to the subdued sound of prayer flowing ceaselessly from their lips.

The sun circled ever higher. His beams fell full on the two men and flung their shadows far across the dust of the track. The red lining of Athman's jacket glowed like a thing of flame. Near by, the camels waited in attitudes of inimitable patience.

There was something singularly impressive in the simplicity of their devotions. The absence of self-consciousness ; the unfeigned earnestness ; the force of long habit that concentrated attention upon a set form of words, accompanied by a set form of movement—all were calculated to strike the least observant. These men, insignificant in themselves, were yet part of a spiritual power so mighty as to ring the world with prayer.

El Islam was awake. At that self-same hour, far beyond our vision, over leagues of untraversed space, countless voices were raised in supplication,

countless eyes were turned with longing to the radiant East—the site of the Holy City, symbolized perchance within simple minds by the invariable brightness and majesty of the rising sun.

From populous cities, from obscure villages, from oases lost in the Sahara, from caravans far out in the desert—the cry was still the same, “Allah!”

“Allah!” It rose and fell. The melodiousness of the word lulled the mind. It soothed the soul. It whispered of divine protection. Was it not the angel of Hope fluttering her rainbow wings, even within the sanctuary of the Spirit?

“Allah!” It came again, stealing through the sunlight, vibrating around us in waves of sound. We were no longer alone. All the little voices of the desert awoke into praise. It was as if a thrill of gladness ran through the weary earth. There was a joyous presence in the morning that made itself felt—that stirred the heart to worship. Of their own accord my lips, too, framed the universal prayer. “Allah!” I murmured, “Allah Akbar! Allah il Allah! Yes, truly, God is great.”

CHAPTER III.

ON THE MARCH.

As we journeyed onwards a change was to be observed in Athman. His being appeared to expand in the fierce sunlight and the uncontaminated breath of the desert. He was as a man restored to his native element—as a sailor who, after long languishment on shore, feels again beneath his feet the swerving deck of a ship. At times he would throw out his chest and fill his lungs double deep with the diamond air ; at others, struck by the shaft of sudden inspiration, he would fall to scribbling on a piece of paper ; and again he would lift up his voice and croon some Arab song, of no recognisable melody—monotonous, persistent, wearing out the listener's patience.

On one occasion, when we had topped a long rise and our little caravan had halted to enable Abdullah to adjust the pack of the baggage-camel, Athman opened his arms as though embracing in spirit the wide and distant view, and softly I heard him murmur to himself :

“ The desert—the great desert—and the sunshine on the desert.” Then turning to me and swaying in his lofty seat, he said proudly :

“It is my country, Sidi. Do you wonder that I love it? Was there ever a land so free, so glorious? One might march for a month and not come to the end of it. And the oases, are they not beautiful? Look there!”

He pointed ahead. A line of green barred the horizon. It was the oasis of Sidi Okba. We were too distant to distinguish details—how the palm-trees grew, and what lay beneath their tall and symmetrical stems; but the sight of that glistening line caught imperiously at admiration.

Lazily we drifted into talk, interrupted now by his camel, now by mine lagging behind to snatch a mouthful of shrub. I played no principal part in the conversation, content to remain a listener, content to watch his animated face as his words came free and fast with the confiding garrulity of a child. His delight at finding an auditor was amusing to witness.

He told me much about himself; of his boyhood at Zaouiat Ribah; of the labour in the little fields that lie beneath the palms; of the date-harvest, and the festivals that take place on autumn nights, and of his mother whom he had not seen for many years, and who occupied—as he phrased it—“*Une position très honorable chez un Marabout*” in far-away Kabylia. He spoke of her tenderly, regretting the separation, but much consoled by the thought that she, who belonged to a race of Marabouts, was now the companion of a holy man.

Of his poetry he was always more than delighted

to speak. He had none of the reticence which we associate with Western poets. Concealed about his person were a marvellously varied assortment of poems. These would he produce upon the smallest provocation ; indeed, I oftentimes suspected that he purposely guided the stream of conversation into channels which he foresaw would lead us inevitably to a poetical waterfall. It was a sad upsetting of preconceived opinion. In all Oriental tales which I have read, from the Arabian Nights downward, the hero invariably quotes the verses of another, modestly prefacing the quotation with the phrase : " As saith the poet " ; but Athman, though not above such borrowing, preferred to fall back on the poetry he knew best—his own.

I have intentionally omitted to give any examples of Athman's poetry. They did not lend themselves happily to translation. Athman, however, was by no means of my opinion. He was proud of his French, and never grew weary of turning his verses into that language. But their new dress did not become them ; they halted pitiously ; all their freshness and charm, their wealth of Oriental imagery, fell from them, leaving only skeletons of thought masquerading in inappropriate costume.

The conversation turned upon how he spent his evenings.

" You wonder what I do," he cried, nodding his head and smiling at me ; " I will tell you. You have seen perhaps a little Arab café, it is the second on the right hand when you leave the hotel as you

walk up the principal street of Biskra. *Eh bien !* it is there that I read—read aloud, you understand—to the Arabs.”

His words recalled an evening at Biskra when, *table d'hôte* finished, I had strolled idly along the streets, interested in the stream of Oriental humanity that ebbed and flowed in the night air. As I passed this little café, a knot of loungers clustered outside attracted my attention. They were peering over each other's shoulders into the dimly-lighted interior. All were breathlessly silent, listening to the sound of a voice. I, too, paused out of faint curiosity. Through the open doorway I had seen a man seated cross-legged upon a platform. His face and the book which he held were lighted by a candle placed at his elbow. Around him the café was plunged in a semi-obscurity that, as I gazed, reluctantly gave to my eyes its complement of sheeted figures encumbering the floor. Recognising that I had stumbled upon that product of the East, a professional reader, I had lingered awhile in the starlit street, silent as those about me, while from within the eager voice rose and fell, its steady current broken at intervals by hoarse comment or muffled applause.

As this scene flashed upon my mind I gazed at Athman in surprise.

He chuckled throatily.

“ Yes, Sidi ; I read there often. This winter I read the legend of Antar—you have without doubt heard tell of Antar, a great poet and Arab warrior, who lived long, long ago.”

I questioned him as to the date, but he shrugged his shoulders.

"Allah knows, Sidi; as for me, I no longer remember; dates do not interest me. But the history—*Mon Dieu!* that interests me much. Yes, those are the histories I like: war and love, for Antar was mad with love for the beauteous Abla. Ah, what a woman! fair as the full moon and graceful as a gazelle. Aie! Aie!"

He dug an enthusiastic heel into his camel's flank.

"I read other things too," he continued hastily, in fear that I would undervalue his accomplishment. "But yes, last winter I read the history of Saïf ben Thayzin, great-grandson of Noah. The Arabs like it very much, but not so much as the legend of Antar—no, not so much."

We rode for awhile without speaking.

"I am glad that you understand the beautiful Arabic," he continued softly. "One day you shall hear me read. I will also tell you many stories. My head is full of stories. But I could not tell them in French: no; to tell a story in French would never do. *Tiens!* it would be as if you tied the feet of a little bird to the earth at the moment when it wished to fly—yes, just like that." He fluttered his arms in the air. Then, his face brightening, he continued: "Ah! but to read, that excites me. You have no idea. I am no longer a guide. I am a prince, a captive, a lady, a lover. I shout; I implore; I weep; and then, *Mon Dieu!* all at once, I look up to find my-

self in a café—only a reader—with many eyes watching me.”

We were by this time come to within half a mile of the oasis. An opening, towards which our track sped, appeared in the line of green. A continuation of the road we were following, it cut its way through dense vegetation, and at right angles to the sweep of the oasis straight to the village of Sidi Okba. To left and right the wall of foliage, of dusky stems and drooping fronds, swept unbroken. It trended away on either hand in wide-reaching bays and wooded promontories to where, far off, the backward curve snatched it from sight. It resembled a breaker poised high before it fell in sounding ruin. The leaping crests all glistening in sunlight curled over the black-browed shadows. Here one higher than its neighbours, tossed its head into the blue ; there, in the background, a burst of isolated green shone conspicuous. It was movement suspended, the green of the oasis threatening the sands of the desert.

But that which struck the eye and acted most powerfully on the imagination was the loneliness that brooded over all. The great desert lay tenantless as a desolate sea. The silence was a thing to be felt. The empty blue of the sky circled to meet the empty blue of the horizon. Not a cloud, not even a solitary bird broke the untroubled azure. The appalling sweep of the plains, the shadow margin beneath the trees, the thread of road alluring onwards, all were deserted—void of life. The strange and mysterious silence was deep as of the grave, and this was all the more remarkable in that the phy-

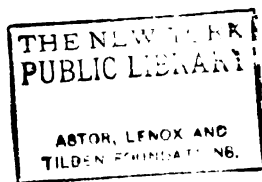
sical joyousness of the light, the marvellous completeness of illumination lent itself to no such morbidity of feeling. Our little party, creeping onwards in the beating sunlight, was the one and only touch of animation.

The indescribable atmosphere as of things alien and remote, as of a continent, lost in unimaginable antiquity, filled me with exultation. I seemed to have wandered into the past—into a world that had no connection with the stir and bustle of modernity. My heart warmed to the very camels, their out-of-date appearance was so eminently satisfactory, so singularly appropriate. Athman and Abdullah, too, with their Oriental charm of costume, called for admiration. My blood revelled in the sunlight, my eyes rioted among the palms, my breath quickened in eager sympathy. “This,” thought I, “is at last the threshold of the South—the *real* South ; and I, even I, am a part of it !”



A morning salutation.

[To face page 22.]



CHAPTER IV.

SIDI OKBA.

I LAY on my back in a little garden. A rivulet stolen from the interior of the earth by an artesian well sang through it. The palms, the figs, and the vines, which grew around me, appeared to rejoice in the clear and running water that laved their roots, then danced away to other gardens hidden behind the high mud walls. Overhead the fronds met in many a maze of intertwisted greenery, the bright leaves of the fig trees contrasting pleasantly with the darker foliage of their companions. The canopy was spattered with blue where flecks of sky showed bright as sapphires in their setting of green. The dry and beaten earth on which I lay was tremulous with lights and shadows. The garden belonged to a rest-house, the walls of which I could see through the trees when I raised my head.

Athman had escorted Abdullah and the camels to a house of a friend who, he assured me, would stable the animals and offer us hospitality for the night. I awaited his return in drowsy *dolce far niente*, steeped in the warmth of noon-day, oblivious of the passage of time.

Beyond the boundary wall of the garden ran a path, hedged on the one hand by sun-baked mud walls, and on the other by a little brook fringed with palm-leaves. At times, and between long intervals of profound silence, voices reached me, and once, when prompted by curiosity I peeped over the barrier, I saw two venerable Arabs listlessly exchanging a morning salutation.

It was utterly peaceful. The rivulet discoursed liquid music by my side. Now and again, when the branches stirred lightly at the touch of a passing breeze, I became conscious of the play of wandering sunbeams upon my face. A subdued twitter told of feathered life, up there, in the shadowy world of leaves. Once a ring-dove with a lilac collar fluttered close to my head, then, alarmed at my presence, sought refuge in a palm-tree. From the depths of shadow came its voice cooing melodiously ; then it shook itself, for a branch rustled ; at last the soft sounds died away and the branch became motionless as though traced with ink on an azure ground.

The little garden was of no shape that could be set down in definite words. Its boundaries appeared to be as unconventional as the disposition of the trees within it. There was a naturalness, a waywardness, in this sylvan retreat that charmed the eye. The larger number of the trees and shrubs had congregated in close vicinity to the brook—as though they took a living pleasure in gazing on the bright and running water, and in drooping their fronds to listen to its music.

It was pleasant lying there. I was in no hurry for Athman to return. Where was the haste? Of what importance were the lazy hours? Was I not in the East, that enchanted land where Time flies on laggard wing, where the sun, driving his golden chariot overhead, is the only indefatigable traveller?

It was pleasant, too, to realize that I was in the midst of the oasis of Sidi Okba; that all around me were countless such gardens; that eighty thousand palms sprang from the soil whereon I lay; that, beyond the circle of greenery, stretched the desert—a shut door on past experiences, a raised curtain on happy anticipations.

Athman's step roused me from reverie. I watched him as he crossed the garden and leapt the brook. He moved superbly; not with the conscious dignity—the—what I can only term “stalk” of the genuine Arab, but with an elasticity of grace which was peculiarly his own. It gave the observer an impression of strength and of joy of movement for movement's sake that we associate with certain wild animals. To see him in action was a pleasure.

He squatted on his heels by my side.

“Sidi,” he said, “it is all arranged. My friend is from home, he is on a journey, but his wife offers us hospitality. They are very poor and their baby is ill—a sad household, I fear.”

“And Abdullah and the camels?”

“They go to a caravanserai, not far away; it is better so. Now I wish to know what the Sidi will

eat for supper. Here is a list of our provisions. If the Sidi will do me the honour to command."

Running my eyes over the paper which he offered me, I noted among various edibles the extraordinary item of "Twenty boxes sardines, first quality."

I looked hastily up to find Athman's eyes fixed upon me.

"Twenty boxes sardines!" I ejaculated.

"They are good to eat," he replied with feigned cheerfulness.

"But *twenty* boxes!"

"Have I not done right?" he cried, anxiously.

"The Sidi said that he wished to be surprised."

"I am surprised," I retorted grimly.

His face lengthened—he was unaffectedly disappointed.

"It is that——" he began, then hesitated and looked at me. His eyes betrayed a doubt as to the spirit in which I would receive his words.

"Well?" I prompted.

"It is that—I adore sardines."

* * * * *

Together we set forth to visit the town.

It was amusing to watch Athman among his fellows—to note the gusto with which he conformed to all the ceremonious observances of the Arabs. To an inferior he bowed slightly, acknowledging the servility of the other with an air of lofty patronage that was highly entertaining. To an equal he was all courtesy, meeting him with extended hand, invariably raising his own fingers thereafter to his lips, as is the custom when great

cordiality is to be expressed. But it was on a superior, particularly if the superiority had its origin in religion, that Athman lavished the pent-up veneration in his heart. A Marabout would pass. In a moment Athman was kneeling at the great man's feet, pressing respectful lips upon the benedictory hand. Then, rejoining me, he would murmur in an impressive voice :

"Sidi, a Marabout ! You have seen. The holy one recognised me at once. I am proud. It is a most singular honour."

How shall I tell of those streets of Sidi Okba ? of their fascination ? of their air of having fluttered from the pages of the Arabian Nights ? It was all pure Orient, undiluted even by one Western touch. It was a succession of pictures, for the picturesque predominated to such an extent that, turn wheresoever one would, the pictorial sprang always to the eyes and clamoured for immediate admiration.

Bewildered — delighted — the attention rushes hither and thither. You gaze at the butcher's shop — was there ever such a shop, or such a butcher ? the one a purple cavity beneath a scarlet awning — the other a stately Arab in sunlit draperies. The girl in the caftan of faded rose-colour next claims your attention ; she is standing in the patch of sunlight, fascinated by the wares of the working jeweller. And again your eyes are drawn to the distance, more alluring still, for between the diminishing houses, sheeted figures come and go, vague, mysterious—the lazy, shiftless, magical crowd of an Eastern town.

In the dust of the street, in the wash of the walls, in the costumes of the passers-by, white predominated. Now and again, however, a child in emerald-green, or brick-red—that beautiful shade of red in which the Arabs love to dress their little ones—flitted through the crowd, its passing was as the airy passage of a butterfly ; such colour interruptions, however, were rather the exception than the rule.

In the shadow of the houses, their backs against the walls, many men were seated ; the nondescript grey of their draperies losing sharpness of outline against the nondescript grey of their surroundings. The sunshine was the making of the picture. It fell in a torrent of light, deluging the street with a flood of brilliance almost painful in its intensity. Where a break in the architecture permitted, it even routed the shadows that lurked on the shady side of the street. O these shadows born in the lands of sunlight ! They no more resemble our northern shadows than noon-day resembles twilight. They are something opaque, yet transparent ; cold, yet warm with colour. They are like deep water. You fancy them dark, and yet when you come to examine them, you are surprised to discover that they are light. Blot out the sunshine and they would be shadows no longer, but light as the lightest hours of a northern day.

We bent our steps in the direction of the Mosque. We had not gone far before we were joined by Abdullah. He was more than usually disreputable. Athman's features contorted into a grimace.

"I do not much like to be seen with him in a town," he whispered. "He never buys a new burnous till the old one falls in rags. He is somewhat of a beast."

"You go to the Mosque?" inquired the beast blandly. "I will accompany you. Once, many moons ago, one of my camels—my favourite—fell sick. I was here at the time, so I offered up prayers on her behalf at the shrine of the good saint Sidi Okba. My camel recovered in three days. Now I pray always. Religion is an excellent thing. Wah!"

In the outer court of the Mosque we were accosted by a young priest. Athman ran to him at once and embraced him on either cheek. The priest received the attention with dignity. A faint odour exhaled from his draperies—whether of scent or incense I could not determine. Yawning often, he stood before us, his thin brown fingers caressing the merest suspicion of a moustache. He plainly wished us elsewhere. Athman, he deigned to converse with in affected monosyllables—me, he allowed his eyes to rest on once—Abdullah, he ignored altogether.

"We fain would visit the Mosque," suggested Athman politely. The priest gave a languid assent, and motioning to us to follow led the way towards the inner court.

Having visited the interior, we climbed the minaret, rejoining daylight on the tiny platform that dominates the town. Seated on the parapet in the beating sunshine, Athman embarked on the history of Sidi Okba, the illustrious warrior from whom

the town derives its name. It is a stirring tale, full of adventure and thrilling situations. Athman told it well, throwing his whole heart into the recital. He literally snatched the bones of the old warrior from their quiet resting place below, clothed them in flesh and blood ; breathed vitality into them—and there ! Sidi Okba stood before us, a living man holding attention spell-bound. We followed the fortunes of the warrior saint with interest. We watched him sally forth at the bidding of the Kaalifa Maouia, accompanied only by a small body of Arab horsemen, having for his object the subjugation of Northern Africa in the sixtieth year of the Hejira. We rejoiced in his victories, one after another, till all the coast of the Mediterranean, from Egypt to Tangier, owned him master. We thrilled with admiration when, spurring his horse into the Atlantic, he shouted aloud that only such a barrier prevented his forcing every nation over-sea who knew not the true God, to worship Allah or die. And, finally, our hearts were moved with pity for his untimely fate, when we listened to the story of his death. How Koceila, the Berber chief, the mortal foe of Sidi Okba, massacred him and three hundred of his followers at Tehouda. “ A little village over there ”—Athman pointed over the summits of the palm-trees—“ And,” he continued proudly, “ years after, the Arabs when they reconquered all this beautiful country, brought his bones here, to this Mosque, to show to all men the admiration for great deeds that lives always in the hearts of my compatriots.”

CHAPTER V.

WITHIN THE MOSQUE.

OVERCOME with heat, I stretched myself in a shady recess. My companions seated themselves not far distant within the shadow of the minaret. They made a picturesque group, the priest in snowy draperies and spotless turban; Athman in pale mauve with red fez—a cheerful contrast to his dark complexion; Abdullah in grey burnous and cotton head-dress bound around his temples with a twisted cord fashioned out of camel's hair. Their attitudes, too, were no less picturesque than were their costumes. They were full of indolent grace, languorous as though the hours of the day were countless as the sands of the desert and every hour but created for rest and drowsy conversation.

The sunlight fell in a patch of flame upon a portion of the court, lighting the mud wall till it glowed red as the heart of a fire. When I gazed upwards I could see the sky, a depth of illimitable blue, into which the eyes soared like towering birds. Over this expanse there swept at intervals a band of swallows, chasing one another. Their exultant cries made themselves known to the ear, at first almost in-

audibly, then resolving themselves into a rush of approaching sound; passing overhead in a very tumult of gladness, a tempest of delight; and anon dying, far off, a mere whisper across the ocean of silence.

The flight of the swallows did no more than ruffle the atmosphere of repose for a fleeting minute. No sooner had they passed than the court sank again into dreams, lapped in the warmth, drowsy as a sleeper who turns to resume interrupted slumber.

I amused myself with listening to the conversation of my companions.

"The colour of thy coat pleaseth me, and of a surety never have I seen finer buttons," condescended the young priest, surveying Athman with languid interest. The black face of my guide glowed with satisfaction, but with a deprecatory gesture he murmured :

"It is unworthy of thy attention."

"White," continued the priestling, "is more chaste." He caressed his draperies with bland self-approval. "It is more becoming to a priest, but it is not given to all men to practise my honourable profession."

"Garments but conceal nakedness," observed Abdullah sententiously, breaking the silence for the first time.

The priest measured him through insolent eyelids, then turning an offended shoulder, addressed himself to Athman.

"Thou travellest to Tougourt ? "

"As thou sayest."

"Remember me courteously to the excellent Sidi Hadj Achmet ; it is long since I have seen him ; is he still Mueddin at the great Mosque ? "

"Of a surety ; I saw him not many moons ago. His voice welcomed me from the minaret, as I neared Tougourt."

Abdullah began to munch some coarse Arab sweets which he produced from the capote of his burnous. The priest shot a disgusted look in his direction. Athman yawned loudly.

"Dost thou travel with a son of the English ? " questioned the priest.

"As thou sayest."

"Is much money to be made at thy trade ? "

"Scarce a living ; there are as many guides as travellers in Biskra. Some there be who fight for custom. It is not dignified. I wait always till I am entreated. But—I make no fortune."

"Ah, but thou hast thy reading and thy poetry. I have heard, Oh, I have heard." The priest wagged a shaven head. "The palm is doubly blest of Allah that is watered by two streams ; and thou, O fortunate one, hast three means of livelihood."

"It is good to be rich," croaked Abdullah, casting an envious glance at Athman's mauve jacket.

"Tell me, O son of Salah," wheedled the priest, "has this son of the English much money ? "

Athman shrugged a languid shoulder.

"Of a surety he is rich," mumbled Abdullah, his fingers within his mouth in an attempt to extract a too adhesive sweetmeat.

The priest drew a long breath, an avaricious light

gleamed in his eyes, a smile hovered round his thin lips.

"Son of Salah," he said softly, "this Mosque is poor."

Athman grunted.

"And I"—he touched his draperies with pensive fingers—"I also am poor."

"Ho! ho! ho!" chuckled Abdullah. "A priest—and poor!"

"Unclean dog!"

The fawning voice sprang to sudden anger.

"Sh-h-h!" reproved Athman. "What foolish talk is this? Besides, it availeth nothing; the Sidi will give what seemeth unto him good. Moreover, he heareth us, he has a little Arabic. See, he moves."

They cast furtive glances in my direction. For some time they whispered together and I could overhear nothing; then, becoming forgetful of my presence, their voices were again raised. They spoke of dancing girls.

"It is many moons since one of repute came here," sighed the priest. "Not since Fatma. Dost thou remember Fatma, O son of Salah?"

"Of a surety," responded Athman; "I was but seventeen at the time; it was my first year in Biskra; but I can still see her if I shut my eyes."

He swayed his outstretched arms; his ears appeared to listen for the flute and beaten drum.

"She was a breaker of hearts and an allurement unto the eyelids," murmured the priest, shaking his head.

"Aye, and a stumbling block to youthful feet," said Athman sadly.

"What!" chuckled the priest. "Didst thou love her then?"

"Praise be to Allah, no! To me she was distasteful. I thought only of my friend Hamed."

"What of him?"

"Dost thou not remember? Methought it was known even unto the housetops. It was for long common talk in Biskra."

"It hath not reached mine ears," said the priest.

"Nor mine," cried Abdullah.

"Tell us the tale, we beseech thee," they cried together.

The priest stretched himself on the warm tiling of the court. The Arab too, assumed an attitude of greater ease. Athman sat erect. His features composed themselves into a sad and thoughtful expression; his hands, ever active, emphasized his words with graceful gestures. The blue stone in his ring flashed into unexpected lights. Again the swallows wheeled through the radiant air.

"He was my friend," began Athman simply, his eyes fixed upon the opposite wall from which the sun was gradually withdrawing his rays. "He came from the village of Chria Saiah, which, as ye know, lies but an hour's journey from my village of Zaouiat Ribah."

"I know it well. Many times have I been there," cried Abdullah.

"Silence," snapped the priest.

"He, too, loved poetry," continued Athman, heedless of interruption.

"Not all the poetry that I love, for he had not the gift of tongues, but Arab poetry, and Moorish, with the songs that touch the heart and bring tears to the eyes."

"And the songs of the road?" inquired Abdullah eagerly.

"What songs are these?"

The priest lifted a contemptuous chin. Abdullah gesticulated with enthusiasm.

"The best of all songs. Songs that one sings to lighten the weary feet. O, I have heard many such on the long marches!"

"I do not think we knew songs of the caravan in those days," said Athman thoughtfully. "We had not travelled. We had to labour all day among the palms, as is the custom in the villages. But when work was over we would meet and wander at night into the desert. There would we seek words to tell of the thoughts that came to us. Oftentimes we spoke of love—I lightly, he yearningly, as one who pines for the bridal-night. Then Allah visited me with affliction, for my father died, and my mother went to the far hills, and I left Zaouiat Ribah for Biskra. Many moons passed before my eyes beheld him again. I was reading in the café—aloud, be it understood, as is my custom of an evening—when in my time of rest I raised my eyes, and behold! Hamed stood in the door. Allah! my heart leaped within me. I ran to him and we embraced tenderly. [He sat beside

me till my reading was done, then I took him to my home, even to my room upon the house-top. Allah! how he had changed! He looked like one consumed in the furnace of a great passion. And so it was. Hamed was in love at last—and with Fatma.”

The priest looked up with sudden interest.

“Yes,” continued Athman sadly, “she ruined him. His father bequeathed unto him money, for he was rich; but Hamed squandered it all upon Fatma. When it was gone, she mocked him; aye, openly, even to his face. He became a bye-word in Biskra. Many times did I remonstrate with him, as one friend striveth with another, for I loved him with my whole heart. At times he made a semblance of listening—and I rejoiced; but in the midst of my joy I grew sad, for I saw that my words did not reach his heart. Only when I spoke of Fatma would he lend an attentive ear. Then would he fall to praising her face and form with burning words, even unto the extremity of passion, and when he did that I had nought to say, for, as ye are aware, O true sons of the Prophet, her beauty was beyond compare!”

“True words,” assented the priest. “Allah!” he flung out his chest with an impatient sigh, “let us talk of other matters, I pray thee. It is not seemly to think too much about women.”

“But, O believers, I wish to hear this tale even unto the end,” importuned Abdullah.

“It grieveth me to tell it,” said Athman reluctantly.

"But this once, and never will I trouble thee again."

"As thou wilt." Athman paused, sighed, then continued in a low voice: "The last time that I held converse with him we parted in the dawning. When he said farewell he held my shoulders with hands that trembled. 'Aloui,' said he, 'thou rememberest how we talked oftentimes of love in the old days. Aloui, it has come to me at last—it is here.' He smote himself on the chest. I listened to him with apprehension, for his face was as the face of one who seeth that which no tongue may declare. 'Whither goest thou, Hamed?' I cried, for I was in the grip of a great fear. But naught further would he say, and the next moment he had passed like a shadow from my sight. Never shall I forget his face." Athman shuddered, and passed a hand across his eyes. "It haunteth me—even in sleep."

"Whither did he go?" asked the priest in an awestruck voice.

For long there was no answer; then I heard the whisper:

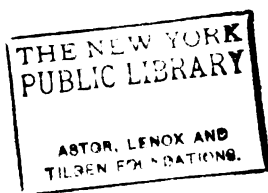
"He went to his death."

A silence fell. The three men appeared to be deep in thought. Of a sudden I looked up, to find that Athman had passed silently from the court.



The distant thoroughfare.

[To face page 38.]



CHAPTER VI.

AN ARAB HOME.

THE house to which Athman conducted me was even more humble than I had anticipated. Like all Arab dwellings, it was built entirely of mud, and jealously screened from outside gaze by high walls and large wooden doors. Once within these doors the visitor was entirely lost to the world, for no window opened to the street. As if to isolate it more effectually, it was situated at the far end of a lane, so that the noise from the distant thoroughfare came only as a faint echo, scarcely stirring the quiet air that slumbered between its walls. The little court, mud-enclosed and littered with rubbish, was distressingly ugly. The only redeeming touches were the topmost branches of a fig-tree that, rearing itself into the sunlight, peeped at us from the garden of a neighbour. The eyes rested gratefully upon the fresh and beautiful green of its leaves.

The house stood at the far end of the court. We entered it through a square opening framed between three rough beams, which it were flattery to call a door. No window gave light to the interior. A hole in the roof provided in an inadequate manner for the exit of smoke. Through this I saw a square

of blue sky—so ethereal and remote that it seemed a glimpse into Heaven. Around the dwelling-room, at the height of eight or ten feet from the mud floor, ran a balcony supported by stems of palm-trees, rough and untrimmed as when they formed part of the forest. A wooden box suspended by ropes hung between two of these natural pillars. Within it lay a baby. A woman stood by the side of this rude cradle, which from time to time she rocked gently to and fro. Huddled in a far corner sat another and much older woman, with a little boy between her knees.

At a word from Athman the woman by the cradle came forward and held out her hand. I took it in mine, where it lay for a moment limp and unresponsive. She had the saddest face in the world—a face from which all the joy of life had been blotted out. Her large dark eyes betrayed not the slightest interest in our arrival. They were full of unutterable melancholy; her whole attitude bespoke a despondency verging on despair. Yet not despair of a lively or poignant nature, but the dull and uncomplaining resignation of one who had been for long a stranger to hope. The greeting over, she returned to her occupation of rocking the cradle.

“How fares the little light of thine eyes, O Lala?” inquired Athman. The woman answered but by a negative movement of the head.

We came nearer and looked at the child. It was, as I conjectured, but a year old, yet it had already the careworn expression of an aged person. Its eyes were encircled with the black preparation

which Arab mothers smear on the eyelashes of young children. It is supposed to be beneficial to the sight and to protect them from the attack of flies. These two dark circles gave a painfully artificial look to the little face. One hand lay outside the rags that did duty for a coverlet. It resembled more the hand of a doll than that of a child—so very small was it, thin as a wafer, the five tiny nails dyed bright red with henna.

“Does the little new moon ever smile?” questioned Athman.

“Not now,” sighed the mother. “Time was when she smiled, aye, and laughed too, on occasion; but now, Allah help her! she is too ill.”

The infant opened weary eyelids and gazed in our direction, but I doubted if she were aware of our presence. Even as we watched, the eyelids drooped, the prematurely aged face contracted with suffering, and a faint moan came from the lips. Sudden pain flashed to the mother’s face. Without a word she drew the little sufferer into her arms and sought to feed it from the breast. The child, however, refused to be thus comforted; and, the wail continuing, she cradled it upon her bosom, rocking herself to and fro with a rhythmic and monotonous movement of the body. Gradually the moaning ceased. The child sank into fitful slumber. The woman bending over it had the air of listening to its breathing. The silence was broken only by the buzzing of flies.

There were two inner rooms, in one of which Athman placed my camp-bed. It was a small

apartment used for the storage of dates and dried apricots. But little light filtered in through the only aperture, a hole high up in the outer wall. No signs of former occupancy were visible. Spiders' webs festooned the corners, mice scampered over the mud floor, flies settled everywhere. On the wall I saw two lizards of repulsive appearance. They were small, flat, viscous, pale yellow in colour, with triangular heads carried low, and altogether much more objectionable to the eye than salamanders. These creatures ran to and fro, pursuing each other, regardless of my presence. Overhead, forming the ceiling of the room, a large and dirty sheet stretched from wall to wall. Across it, I marked the passage of small unknown animals which, though concealed from sight, betrayed their presence by the continual agitation of the sheet, and by occasional cries—soft whispering sounds clearly audible in the silence of the house.

When I joined the others in the living-room, Athman had already lighted a small charcoal fire. The ruddy glow pleased the eyes, alternately dulling and brightening as he fanned it with the end of a palm-leaf. The old woman had seated herself by his side. Knees drawn up to chin, she stared apathetically at the glowing embers. She was as nearly dead an old woman as ever I saw: her face crumpled parchment, her mouth fallen in through lack of teeth, her nose completely eaten away by disease, her eyes bleared with age and deeply sunken within red sockets—and yet, she clung to life like the best of us. Her little comforts, too, were dear

to her : she enjoyed the kindly heat of the fire, and watched the preparation of coffee with interest. The grateful odour pleased her ; she was aware of it ; it flattered her sense of smell.

Seated thus, swathed in the folds of her caftan, she reminded me of a mummy. Something almost uncanny, too, suggested itself in her appearance—something witch-like, as though she indeed possessed malignant and supernatural powers.

Roused by the sound of my footsteps, she peered up at me from under twitching eyebrows ; then, reaching out a skinny hand, shook the little boy, who had succumbed to the drowsy heat of the fire. The child staggered to his feet and began at once to beg. The boyish treble, pitched to the beggars' whine, struck but another note in the sadness of my surroundings.

Between us and the outer door hung the box-cradle. The younger woman still bent over it. The wailing had for the moment ceased, but the oscillation of the cradle continued. The figure of the mother stood out in trenchant contrast to the light of the court beyond.

Day was almost dead. The topmost boughs of the fig-tree alone caught the dying sunlight. The room rapidly became dark ; but, as the dusk fell, the glow from the charcoal fire brightened into bolder prominence. Athman's face, bending over it, shone in the red light. It splashed, too, the draperies of the old woman, and suffused the naked brown of the walls with a flush of faint colour. In the corners deep shadows congregated. One metal pot lying

near the door still caught a reflection of daylight, but even this dulled to obscurity as the minutes passed. The odour of coffee filled the air. Athman heated the water in an earthenware dish; the coffee he made always in the tiny copper receptacles, bright with much polishing and fastened to long handles, which are so picturesque and will ever be associated in my mind with the thick sweet coffee of the Arabs.

That evening meal was an experience that I shall not soon forget. The sense of alienation, of being far away from my own country and my own people, sat near my heart. And yet this feeling, tuned though it was to a minor key, was not without its compensations. It lent a peculiar and indefinable charm—a far-off and old-world quality—to my surroundings, without which they would perhaps have sunk into the regions of commonplace. It gave me an insight, too, into the home-life of the humbler sort of Arabs—the Arabs of the caravan; and I pictured to myself the thoughts of these Nomads when, in the dust and heat of the desert, they anticipated the home-coming and the dreamless sleep to be enjoyed under just such another roof as that which stretched above me.

The old woman and the little boy, who had watched the final preparations of our meal with hungry eyes, were persuaded to join us. Athman's invitation was couched in such poetic terms, and was uttered with such respectful courtesy, that I turned away to repress a smile. If my memory serves me aright, he addressed the hag as "O full

and perfect moon," and the urchin as "Little evening star." It was touching to see the attention which he bestowed upon the former guest, choosing her out tit-bits, luring her into spasmodic conversation, deferring always to her opinion. Athman gloried in young life, yet he invariably treated the very aged with a tenderness of respect that caused old eyes to smile and old hearts to warm when he approached. It was as though he could not do enough to show how deeply he regretted that they were no longer young. Nor was the woman by the cradle forgotten—Athman hovered about her like a hospitable bee, buzzing with sympathy.

When the supper things were cleared away, and the "Little evening star" had licked the last oleaginous memory of sardines from out the empty tin, Athman lighted a candle, which he placed in the neck of a bottle. The unwonted splendour of this illumination awed all present. Even the baby ceased its occasional whimper to watch our distorted shadows upon the wall. Seen in this flickering candle-light, the face of the old woman appeared more witch-like than ever.

Athman was the feature of the evening—the silver lining of the otherwise gloomy cloud. The artful manner in which he succeeded in arousing the interest of his audience awoke my admiration. He began by narrating a story, so simple that even the little boy could understand it. Then he went on to speak about babies, betraying much unexpected and, it must be confessed, erroneous information regarding their manners and customs, their

ailments and their diet. This provoked an indignant response from the mother, still seated by the cradle. She contradicted him flatly on several important points, clinching her arguments with illustrations drawn from the life of the little one in the cradle. Athman, with respectfully inclined fez, listened attentively, with the modest air of one who receives the opinion of an expert.

But was he silenced? By no means! At the first pause in the flow of maternal eloquence he boldly embarked upon the history of a baby of his acquaintance who had been ill—much more seriously ill than the little one then present—and yet had grown into a very healthy child—a palm-tree, he phrased it, of a hundred lusty summers. He spoke well. So vivid were his words, so graphic his gestures, that I all but saw the little wavering life, and marked with pleasure its swift steps towards convalescence.

While he told this story the mother stole forward, her heart within her ears. When he had finished speaking, she put several questions to him, eager, breathless questions, longing for confirmation of the tale, which he answered with the most convincing gravity. The woman's face softened, her wistful eyes grew bright, and when she returned to the cradle it was with a step that was almost light-hearted.

Then, having succeeded in making everyone happy, Athman produced a flute—judging that the time had now come for the gentle touches of harmony. Athman's command over the Arab flute was in every way remarkable. He could woo from

out the bowels of that primitive instrument the most wonderful music. Feelings sprang into sound at his touch. Barbaric, if you will, but still intensely human.

The old lady, in particular, fell under the weird influence of the music. She drifted into dreamland. She did not sleep, for her eyes were open and fixed unwinkingly upon the fire that had been replenished with cakes of camels' dung. It was evident however that her thoughts were far away—perchance within the past. Of what was she thinking? Had she wandered back to the days when she too had been young—before this terrible disease had disfigured her—when someone had wooed her with just such Arab music beneath the shadow of the palms?

Still the liquid sounds wailed on, now like the wind sighing among forest branches, now like the babble of unseen water. To my mind it had ceased to murmur of things visible or invisible; it distilled only sadness.

Night had come. Cool breaths of wandering air stole in at the door, bringing somewhat of the incommunicable spirit of nature upon their wings. Gazing outwards, I could see a silver thread of moonlight drawn along the summit of the wall. Above and beyond the heaven pulsed with stars.

No sound came from the distant streets. The little boy had fallen asleep. The two women had sunk into dreams. When Athman paused, the silence was deep, intense. The great quiet night lay like a spell upon the sleeping town.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LITTLE SHRINE.

WHILE watching Athman repacking our luggage into parcels more convenient for disposal about the person of the baggage-camel, I was astonished to see, wrapped in various articles of attire, not one, but half a dozen packets of candles. Their number puzzled me. I could in no way account for so large a supply, being convinced that one packet would have proved more than sufficient to meet my modest nightly illumination.

Upon being questioned, Athman proved unexpectedly reticent. They were *his* candles, he said, but beyond that he would not venture. With much naïveté he even essayed to turn the conversation to subjects of more general interest. His reticence surprised me, and led me to believe that the candles must be in some way connected with his religion—the one topic which, save at moments of pious expansion, he considered too sacred for discussion. And so it eventually turned out. The following information was elicited in dribblets—he bending over the holy candles—I sitting beside him on the sand. Nothing, I may mention, but

extreme gravity and persistence could have coaxed him into telling the tale.

It appeared that his great-grandfather, the Marabout, was at the bottom of the matter. The supreme holiness of this ancestor weighed upon Athman's mind. It was never far distant from his thoughts. With it came a sense of responsibility, a feeling that he, Athman, must do something to prove that he was not unworthy of so honourable a descent. But what to do? What good work would prove acceptable from so poor a guide. For long he had wracked his honest head over it in vain. At length, feeling the need of spiritual advice in so important a matter, he had taken Mahommed Ali, the priest at Biskra, into his confidence. After much thought Mahommed Ali suggested that Athman should present candles to all the tombs of Marabouts passed upon his journeys. This solution of the difficulty caused Athman infinite satisfaction. Together they had purchased the candles—not the common tallow variety, in general use among the Arabs, but candles of good white wax from far countries over-sea, in every way worthy to burn beside the tombs of holy men.

And thus our journey, undertaken lightly and with no other thought than that of cultivating a closer acquaintance with the desert, came to mean much in his eyes—became to him a holy journey, almost a pilgrimage, a ladder of kindly little gifts by which he climbed daily nearer to his great-grandfather, the Marabout.

His manner of distributing these gifts was

governed by strict impartiality. No shrine so small but he would present it solemnly with a candle. On one occasion only I ventured to remonstrate with him.

It was one evening towards sunset, when he had stopped the caravan at the tomb of an obscure saint, which appeared to be unworthy the attention. Age and neglect had writ themselves large upon the tiny sepulchre. Time had stripped the plaster from the roof, and had replaced it with blotches stained to a melancholy grey. One side of the structure had fallen into ruin ; the stem of a fig-tree, long since dead, had displaced the crumbling bricks. Desert sand lay piled around, heaped up loosely by the careless wind. Traces of jackals were clearly distinguishable, while upon the broken wall two scorpions essayed to warm themselves in the dying sunlight.

No words can paint the unutterable sadness of this little tomb—its air of desolation, of awaiting the night—its pathetic acceptance of abandonment, and of the fact that it was now an outcast from the great world of Mahommedan worship. To my material mind it was already dead, as lost and lifeless a thing as the ribs of the camel which we had but that afternoon seen half buried in the sand.

“ Why waste a candle ? ” said I.

But Athman did not heed me. Crawling upon hands and knees into the interior, he at once set to work to clear the place of litter. Through the ragged cavity that yawned in the dome, rubbish of all sorts shot high into the air, accompanied, it must

be confessed, by anathemas hurled at the heads of jackals and others who had dared to pollute the shrine by their presence. Never had I seen Athman so indignant.

As I watched and waited, amused, yet secretly touched by so pious an enthusiasm, a feeble glimmer sprang into being, transforming the interior into a little globe of light. In a moment the shrine became the brightest thing in the landscape, for the sun had by that time set and dusk was at hand.

Athman's satisfaction proved infectious. As we moved away I chuckled to myself, for I pictured the return of the jackal family at bed-time, and how the hair of every desert marauder would bristle when, instead of his own familiar tomb, haunted by reassuring shadows, a fearsome object of uncanny lustre confronted him suddenly in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

SOUTHWARDS.

SIDI OKBA was all but a memory of the past. As we stole out of the town I turned in my saddle and looked long at it with the reluctant tenderness which we all feel for some place in which we have passed happy hours, and which we are destined never to see again.

Dawn still lingered beneath the palms. These children of the Sahara stood motionless and black, the nearer leaves glistening visibly in dull wet lights, the farther crests outlined in neutral tints against the grey of the sky. The great oasis, with its thousands of trees and its little town embedded in greenery, seemed strangely sentient on that spring morning. Silence and tranquility had endowed it with something of human feeling—something almost of Oriental quiescence, and its impression was one of waiting with breathless leaves to welcome the sun.

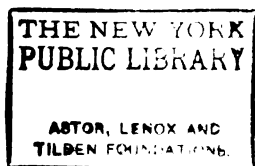
Noiselessly we paced forward, Athman and I in front, Abdullah and the camels behind.

As we forged our way into the open, we came suddenly upon a Nomad encampment—one of



A Nomad encampment.

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those tiny roving villages which one meets with so often in Southern Algeria. It nestled beneath the outer fringe of foliage, as though it had voluntarily sought the companionship of the trees to protect it from the utter loneliness of the desert. The black tents, low-roofed and supported by stakes, were indescribably picturesque. Many Bedouins were grouped around their humble homes. We had stolen upon them so noiselessly that we had taken them unawares. There was nothing gay or striking in their costumes, nothing to charm the eye with unexpected colour. And yet, in spite of the dirty and nondescript rags in which they were dressed, in spite too of their absence of jewellery and air of being powdered with dust, there was something strangely impressive in these graceful figures. They spoke to the imagination of morning marches, of moonlight flittings, of the life that wanders always, day in, day out, over the desolate sands of the desert. Several women were crouching over a fire. A kettle, depending from a tripod, showed black among the eager flames. The yellow glow shone against the background of foliage. Overhead the smoke rose in a thin column till, reaching a delicate current of air, it drifted gently westwards over the heads of the palms.

Gently we wandered southwards. Having crossed the dry water-bed of the Oued Biskra, we entered upon a vast plain partially covered with small and dusty shrubs. Before us the ground rose and fell in long undulations. They reminded me of the sea. In just such a manner would the

ocean rise and fall under the influence of a long Atlantic swell. And our little caravan too, leisurely lifting to the sandy crests, and as leisurely dipping into the spacious valleys, might it not appropriately be compared to a ship—the desert ship—a simile which even custom cannot stale.

The sense of isolation, of being but a point of life in the midst of the wide inanimate, was as much with us as though we were indeed embarked upon a long and desolate voyage.

Athman was, as usual, under the joyous influence of exuberant health and a peaceful conscience. *Joie de vivre* beamed in his face ; it showed transparent in all his actions, from his rollicking and—it must be confessed—quite unsuccessful efforts to extract smiles from Abdullah, to his unfeigned delight in all the incidents of our journey. For him the sunshine of the mind rose long before the sunshine of the world.

Nor were our studies neglected, for we played the part of tutor to each other, and many a laugh did the difficulties of pronunciation afford us—Athman, his tongue between his teeth, striving in vain to master the English “th”—I clearing my throat in a desperate effort to do justice to the Arabic gutturals. Never will I hear Arabic again without recalling those lessons on the march—the keen sunlight, the exhilaration of the early morning, and Athman and I swaying southwards, side by side, the desert unrolling itself before us, from the sand at our feet to the haze of the horizon.

During these long hours passed in the saddle, we

found time for the appreciation of many tales ; for, as Athman had informed me, his head was stuffed with stories. Tales grave and gay, sentimental and barbarous, flowed from him in an apparently inexhaustible stream. Abinawas, the poet of the good Harun al Raschid, was first favourite, but even he did not monopolize attention, for every noteworthy incident of our journey opened doors to anecdote.

On one occasion I reversed the order of affairs and told him a story. He had clamoured for one with so much persistence that my frame of mind resembled that of the Unjust Judge. I told him the tale of "The Elegy of Ernst"—of how, when a boy, the great violinist loved and was beloved by a young girl ; of how her parents would not permit him to marry her till he had earned fame and fortune with his bow ; of how, after five years' incessant labour, crowned with laurels, he had hastened to her village, on fire to claim her hand ; of how he had found her dead, and white, and cold, as the strewn blossoms on her bier ; of how, after months of brain fever owing to his terrible grief, he had called for his beloved violin, and had wooed from it "The Elegy," the echo of his despair, the cry of exceeding bitterness that still draws tears from listening men and women.

Athman gave ear to my story with breathless attention, leaning towards me with wide eyes and parted lips. He had the rapt air of a child under the spell of a fairy tale—lost to the material world—his whole soul on tip-toe within his ears. When

I had finished I looked at him, wondering what he would say.

To my surprise his face expressed only disappointment. He shook his head and drew in a deep breath.

"No," he said emphatically. "That does not please me. If he loved her so much he would have died also."

For some time we rode in silence, Athman evidently pondering over this want of proper feeling in Ernst.

"Ha!" he shouted at length, and his voice rang with satisfaction. "I have found it. I will kill him! It wants but that to be the sort of story I tell to the Arabs. Yes, I will kill him at the bedside of his beloved and all the world will be content!"

Abdullah was a widely different character. He rarely joined in our conversation. We lived in a world beyond the reach of his understanding. Not but that he possessed imagination, for he was a firm believer in the supernatural; nor was he deficient in humour, for a broad or practical joke tickled him at times to the point of tears, and metamorphosed his serious countenance to such an extent that his very ears might be said to participate in his smiles. But these were pardonable relapses from the paths of gravity and were more than atoned for by long hours of unmitigated depression.

Abdullah interested me, although I neither grew to understand nor care for him as I did for Athman. He did not lay himself out to gain my friendship,

nor had he any of the companionable traits of my dusky guide. He was a strange character, taciturn and loquacious by turns, yet on the whole much given to contemplation. He thought slowly and laboriously. The suspicion of ignorance darkened his mind. He groped vaguely in a chaos of elementary thoughts, connected in his more lucid moments with camels. Glimmerings of reason came to him at times, but they rarely found their way into words. Give him the bright sun overhead and the burning desert underfoot, the wind behind, and the camels before him, 'twas all he asked.

More than anything else, the presence of our worthy camel-man made me conscious that I was an alien. There was ever an aloofness in his manner which, although it had its roots in religious differences, I cannot but think he had caught from the camels.

He was a person of many contradictions. On the march, no one displayed more activity nor endurance. Hour after hour would he plod, covering the ground with long, swinging strides, with that wonderful elasticity of the knees which is the secret of all true walkers. And yet in camp he was the laziest of mortals. His charges fed, he would fling himself into the shadow of a palm, or a wall, or my tent, and there would he lie for hours; not sleeping, for his eyes were rarely closed, but simply existing in a condition of listless, effortless inertia. At such times he had all the appearance of a man under the influence of a drug.

I think I liked him best when he bestrode the

baggage-camel. His ample draperies and fine Arab features set off the Eastern appearance of his mount to such advantage. They might have been made for each other. That, however, was a sight I rarely witnessed. For whether it was that Abdullah despised riding, or whether out of the kindness of his heart he wished to save the animal additional weight, the fact remains that he was always, with but rare exceptions, to be found afoot.

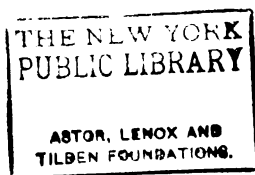
Like Athman he loved to hear himself sing, and would often treat us to an impromptu concert. His favourite position was directly to the rear of his special charge. What a picture they made! The animal stalking majestically forwards, her slender legs moving in a species of leisurely rhythm; the man striding behind her, the slack of his burnous snapping in the wind, their fantastic shadows a moving blueness on the ground, and the same plaintive song quavering on the radiant air.



ALFARDO
TERZI
1904

They might have been made for each other.

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CHAPTER IX.

A FELLOW FEELING.

A CRAVING for tobacco beset me. It was the hour for that most soothing of influences, the first smoke. As I filled my pipe I looked up to find Athman's eyes watching me with unusual interest, his face expressing wonder and admiration. Urging his camel beside mine, he pointed to my pipe.

"*Qu'il est gentil !*" he ejaculated.

I smiled. His admiration pleased me, for I was proud of my pipe. It was a meerschaum of no little beauty, for had it not been carved into the likeness of a negro's head by the most skilful of London sculptors ? Not an ordinary negro. By no means ! But a negro so young and debonnair, so jolly and gay, that the mere sight of him awoke responsive smiles in every face. We had lived, he and I, upon terms of the closest intimacy for the better part of two years, taking life as we found it ; I—as a motley show, responsible for as many tears as smiles ; he—as a side-splitting jest, a widow's cruse brimming over with the oil of everlasting merriment.

He had done me good this little negro. It was impossible to be pessimistic with carven contentment lurking in one's coat-pocket. Then, too, he

had coloured well. At first no one had liked him. A white negro aroused suspicion. But time had changed that, for smoke had added unto smoke until his complexion had tanned to the most beautiful vandyke brown, winking as polished mahogany, a prelude to the long anticipated completeness of the pure and perfect black.

From the first moment of introduction Athman conceived a great friendship, I might almost say affection, for this pipe. His interest in it never flagged. He never grew weary of watching the smoke curling lightly from the heated brain, nor of polishing the smiling face with my silk pocket-handkerchief.

It was not difficult to analyse the feelings with which Athman regarded the little negro. The wonder of his existence held first place. His clever counterfeit of life, his unfailing good-humour, his unexpectedness, were the sources of undying astonishment and gratification. But he stirred other and deeper emotions than these. He was a negro. No strain of Arab ancestry raised the receding forehead, or gave depth and beauty to the negro eyes. Often did I observe Athman to look long at him, with unspeakable sadness, touching the happy little face with compassionate fingers. The pipe awoke thoughts that troubled him. It recalled something that he would fain forget—something that he would not confess, even to himself.

In answer to his questions I explained the colouring process of a meerschaum. He listened to me attentively, overcome with wonder.

"Oh, Sidi! Is it possible that he was formerly white?" he inquired in incredulous tones. I nodded an affirmative.

"And you say that he will one day be black—that is to say, quite, quite black?"

"Yes, if I continue to smoke him."

For awhile Athman gazed at the pipe without speaking.

"Poor little negro," he said at length; "it is too sad."

"What is sad?"

"But to have been white once, and then to become black, quite black—a negro."

His own negro features expressed unaffected commiseration.

"Why do you think so, Athman?"

"It is what I feel, Sidi. One is proud to be an Arab. Yes, it is something, that. But a negro—Wah!"

I puffed for some time without speaking, then, emptying the bowl of its ashes, subjected the merry face to critical inspection.

"The question of colour doesn't appear to weigh on his spirits," I observed thoughtfully. Athman's face brightened.

"So much the better," he assented cheerfully; "he bears it well. I am very pleased. But——" His smile vanished.

"Yes?"

"But, you see, Sidi, he is only joyous, this poor little negro, because he cannot see the future."

"That is the case with all of us, Athman."

He looked at me wonderingly. I continued :

“ It is as you say ; his future is black, and yet he faces life with a laugh. Athman, he teaches us a lesson.”

“ That is true,” he murmured to himself. His eyes rested on the pipe. Their expression told of admiration as of yore, but it was admiration deepened by a feeling that I might almost term respect.

CHAPTER X.

THE SOUL OF THE DESERT.

THE long afternoon was drawing to a close. The sun was on the point of leaving us. In half-an-hour it would be dark, for in these lands of the South there is but little after-glow. No lingering twilight drains the life-blood, drop by crimson drop, from out the veins of day. She is radiant, smiling, to the last golden moment—then, of a sudden, she swoons. The Sun-god has her in his clutches. His burning arms are around her. In fiery haste he plunges with her behind the dark horizon. For a minute there is an agony of dying colour—far continents leaping into flame ; then, peace ; for lo ! a star already twinkles in the sky.

[And what is even more remarkable is the silence. In Northern lands there are so many audible indications of approaching night. But in the desert—nothing. The tyrant sun has killed all sound ; beaten it down with fierce reiterated blows until it lies as lifeless as the sand. The silence is deep—unbroken. It enters into your bones ; it weighs upon your spirits ; it becomes a living presence, a power to be reckoned with.

Slowly we climbed rise after rise, and wound our

way into the intervening valleys. The track had ceased to be a road ; the ruts of wheels had stopped at Sidi Okba, and only a stony channel such as might well be mistaken for a water-course remained to indicate our line of march.

The monotony was unbroken, yet it was full of fascination. The sun, sinking slowly, still deluged the world with light ; the wind still swept over the wide expanse ; the sand still drifted like golden smoke across our track.

Suddenly I was awakened out of a brown study by the sound of Athman's flute. The dying sunlight streaming past me fell full upon him. His blue burnous, fallen from his shoulders, draped the hind-quarters of his camel. The scarlet lining of his jacket and the warm red of his fez glowed hot in the sun. His eyelids, semi-closed, revealed the dreaming blackness of his eyes. Mechanically his fingers moved over the stops.

The air which he played fascinated me. It was wild, barbaric, unfamiliar, full of unexpected turns and sudden inexplicable changes. Heard thus, as we swayed through the sunset, it unconsciously associated itself in the listener's mind, not only with the forms of things visible, but also with the influence of things unseen. There were notes of invitation, low inarticulate calls, that were the voice of the horizon ; there were breathless gasps, sound beaten down by exhaustion, that suggested weary marches over desert sand ; there were passages full of dreams that whispered of longing for that which always lay beyond.

And through it all, linking sound to sound, ran a thrill of emotion, a soft but imperative call that reminded one of spring.

With a smile at my too vivid fancy, I essayed to curb my imagination, to think of the music but as an assemblage of unmeaning sounds. The effort was unsuccessful.

"What music is that?" I asked in a low voice.

"It is the music of the dancing-girls, Sidi. But not of Biskra; no, of the far south—*dans le desert du grand Sahara.*"

His words chimed well with the melody. Instinctively I strained my eyes towards the south. There, where sky and desert met in a golden haze, my thoughts flew like homing birds into the unknown. How full of fascination it seemed! How impregnated with mystery! How alluring! How barbaric! Might it not be, as Athman suggested, the birthplace of passion hot and unrestrained as its sun?

"I learned it long ago, Sidi," he paused to jerk his camel from a bush; "I have never forgotten it. I love it for its own sake, not because it reminds me of dancing-girls. I do not like dancing-girls. They bore me. You are surprised, Sidi? You think: 'An Arab, and not to love dancing-girls!' But it is true. My friend Hamed who is dead mocked me often. But, you understand, I am a poet." He drew himself up with a gesture of much dignity. "Fatma, for example, was beautiful; but there was no imagination in her dancing, no grace—only contortions. Now this——" He played a bar

with expression that was all but passionate. "This is altogether different. This excites me."

"Didn't Fatma dance to that air?" I asked.

"No, Sidi, never. Her music was quite ordinary; what one may hear any day in the cafés. I have never seen anyone dance to this music. I sometimes think it is lost."

"Lost?" I cried.

"But yes, perhaps I am the only one who can play it now. Who knows? An aged man taught it to me under the palms of Zaouiat Ribah. He came from the south. Unexpectedly he came out of the desert, and unexpectedly he went back to it. No one knew aught of him. He told me that this music was an old, old air, born in the sun—but long ago, when the world was young. Beautiful women have danced to it, but they are all dead. To dance as one should to this music one should have feet light as moonbeams and a soul full of melody—and, *voyez vous?*—such a woman is difficult to find. The old man feared that it would die, it was so very old. So, finding that I could play on the flute, he taught it to me. Then one morning he went away towards the south. I watched him go with tears in my eyes. He never came back. No; I looked for him often when the sun sank behind the palms, but I never saw him again—never."

Athman sighed. A small brown bird flew unexpectedly from under a bush. His camel raised a startled head and snarled faintly. Again Athman turned to me.

"Sidi," he cried in a voice of enthusiasm, "how

I wish you had heard him. He played ! Ah, yes, he played ! It was like water running in moonlight. Your soul ran with it. I, do you see, I play. I amuse myself with the flute ; but it is a bagatelle—a nothing ! Pouf ! ”

He blew on his bunched finger-tips as though he were blowing a feather into the air. Then becoming serious, he waved an arm towards the south.

“ It is strange,” he murmured half to himself, “ this music, one would say that it has a soul—the soul of the desert ; not here, but there, far away, *là bas, au sud*. Yes, that is it ; to me it is the Voice of the South.”

I started. How strange it seemed to hear my unspoken thoughts returning to me from Athman’s lips. His words awoke memories. I, too, had felt something of the feelings that swayed him. I, too, had heard the self-same voice luring me ever farther towards the south, as though it were a living presence, a something tangible, a hand drawing one irresistibly sunwards.

CHAPTER XI.

AIN-CHEGGA.

As we neared the Bordj of Ain-Chegga a shrill cry arose, and half a dozen children appeared at the door that gave entrance to the inner court.

Foremost came a diminutive negress in a tattered orange-coloured dress, who carried on her back a still more diminutive negress swathed in purple. Behind her, and holding tightly to her orange rags, came two little Arabs, clad in sleeveless shirts of lemon-yellow, wearing on their heads the orthodox scarlet fez. As if this sudden display of colour were not sufficiently startling, the eye wandered to two tiny ladies-in-waiting, one in emerald green, the other in vivid rose-colour.

The attitude of these little people was sufficiently entertaining. It became evident that they regarded my arrival with wonder, not unmixed with fear. The orange-robed one, in her capacity as leader of the band, showed signs of nervousness. With head carried high she crept on with little hesitating steps, her negress eyes fixed on me with such fascinated interest—such hoverings on the border land of flight, that she reminded me of a fawn lured by curiosity, yet scenting imminent danger in the air.

When I dismounted they fled incontinently for the Bordj. But though the excitement was over, I still heard youthful voices raised in wonderment, and saw little faces peering at me from the dusk of the inner court.

The sunlight had vanished. Even the crests of the rolling-desert hills had become dim and indistinct. The sky, however, was still exquisitely clear, ringing the delicate colour changes from rose to saffron, from softest green to faintest blue.

Athman occupied himself with erecting my tent. The spot chosen was on the outskirts of the nearer oasis, at no great distance from the Bordj. I might, had I so pleased, have slept in the guest-room which the Arabs courteously placed at my disposal, but it had the air of a dungeon, and I preferred to camp beneath the palms where "God kept open house."

My caravan dwelling was of the tiniest. An Arab tent of felted goat-skins, rude in form and low in roof, it spoke of the desert. It seemed to harmonize with its surroundings and to be as natural a habitation as the nest of a bird, or the burrow of a desert-rat. To see it even gave me pleasure, and to occupy it was to come near to the fancy that I was an Arab. I owe that little tent a debt of gratitude. More than anything else—more even than my camels, whose quaint forms always summoned back memories of Noah's Ark—it brought back the sensations of childhood. I never stooped to enter it but the past rushed back, and I saw again the long rainy afternoons of boyhood, and the little make-believe tent, composed of four chairs and the nursery table-

cloth, that had been to me a solace and a delight. The joy of illusion was the same in both cases—the happy imaginings of the boy were, after all, but a prelude to the smiling self-deception of the man.

When night fell, darkness brought solemnity to the little oasis. No other palm-trees, seen before or since, conveyed to my mind the same indefinable charm as those of Ain-Chegga. They were so young—the eldest not more than fifteen years old. Then, too, they were so few. It seemed so brave of them to face the desert with its loneliness and its night. The air of neglect that characterises Arab gardens lent a wayward and picturesque appearance to this collection of trees. The mud wall that had in by-gone days surrounded them was now broken down—almost obliterated. Cheek by jowl the little palm-trees grew in graceful entanglement, massed here and there into thickets of impenetrable obscurity. Below the branches lay stagnant water, betrayed towards nightfall by the croaking of frogs. Overhead, in the network of foliage, a colony of little birds had their abode. When I listened I could hear drowsy twitterings, tentative flutterings in the night of leaves. The gloom increasing, these lodgers went to bed. From the blackness no sound told of life—the silence awed the senses.

Then it was that the desert made itself felt. During the day the oasis had been able to hold its own—to stand out against formless immensity in all the bravery of shape and colour. But now that shape had been obliterated and colour stolen, now that even its outlying leaves had merged into

films of obscurity, it could no longer fight. The desert invaded it. From out the sea of sand came shadowy forms, things unseen in the light, phantoms of darkness mustering to the attack. But the combat was short. A rally of dying colours—a last stand of dim outlines—and the grey nothingness of space passed silently among the trees, and encamped for good beneath the branches. The oasis had ceased to exist—only the desert remained.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE MOONLIGHT.

THE moon rose above the palms. Athman and I watched it in silence.

"Sidi," exclaimed Athman at length, "how glorious that is. That gives me thoughts of—of—*Mon Dieu!* how can I tell?"

He drew a deep sigh, as though the beauty of the night stirred him into vague emotion.

"It is all poetry," he murmured in an awe-struck voice. "The moon, the palms, the desert. It is all poetry."

"Yes," I assented. "The man who could put that into words would be the greatest poet in the world."

"I could do it," he whispered.

"What!" I ejaculated. The sublime self-assurance of the remark staggered me.

"Yes," he repeated, "I could do it. It is because I feel it. I love the moon."

I listened to him with amusement. He proved an interesting study, this young Arab poet. The blend of Arab and Negro—the imaginative tempera-

ment of the one, and the joyous vitality of the other—was the spring in which his character had its being.

The haik, in which he had draped his head and shoulders, shone in faint moonlit folds. His face glowed with enthusiasm ; his eyes were strangely bright.

Slowly the moon sailed upwards into space. Her pale, sad splendours fell athwart the scene. The palms of the tiny oasis showed black against the night, save where their loftiest leaves were tipped with silver. The dead hush beneath the branches was broken at intervals by the passing of a breeze. These puffs of wandering air—a moving coolness rather than a wind—came intermittently out of the unknown. Among the palms a dry rustling noise whispered, died away, whispered again, as the breeze rose and fell.

“I cannot tell,” said Athman slowly, in answer to a question. “It is difficult sometimes to say what one is thinking of. But a night like this makes me feel——” He broke off, gazed for long at the desert. “Perhaps it is love,” he said simply.

To our ears came the distant sound of barking. It came from the blue moonlit desert. A savage sound, yet one that trembled with the pathos of entreaty. Somewhere in the desolate night a jackal was seeking a mate.

A movement recalled me to my companion. Idly I set myself to draw him out. Touching upon his present occupation, I expressed my surprise that he, who could do so much better, was content to remain

a guide. He gesticulated violently. His voice rose in remonstrance.

"I am not content, Sidi, do not think it. Every day I say to myself, 'Athman, *mon garçon*, you will not be a guide always. When you can speak English you will go to Egypt.' Yes, I say that often."

"What will you do in Egypt?"

"I will find employment—perhaps as interpreter. I have a good friend in Egypt, an English gentleman who passed some months in Biskra three years ago. It was he who took me to Paris. When he left Biskra he said: 'Athman, here is my address. When you come to Egypt let me know. I live there. I may be able to help you.'"

"But when——?"

"Oh, soon I hope. When I can speak English. It will not be long now."

He nodded in the most optimistic manner.

"How is it," I questioned, "that others here do not follow your example?"

"I think," said he slowly; "it is because we find it difficult to leave our country. Something always draws us back. The desert. Ah, you do not know what it is. When it calls, one must go."

The words came in a troubled whisper, strangely impressive in the utter stillness of the night. With folded arms he stood beside me, a statuesque figure, his eyes fixed on the mystery beyond.

"Sidi!" he cried suddenly, and there was that in his voice that betrayed the intensity of his feelings. "Sidi, I love the desert. Even at Biskra

I suffer cruelly at times, for my duties will not let me escape. The roof of the house in which I live has a fine view. At night when there is a moon one can see the desert—but far off, vague, a sea of silver beyond the palms. *Mon Dieu!* how I suffer! I long to be there, a longing that gives me pain. I weep. It is stupid, childish perhaps, but I cannot help it. It is stronger than me.”

He broke off to laugh—a laugh that had in it more of sadness than of merriment. Around us all was still. No sound came from the Bordj. Even the cry of the jackal had died away.

“Then, Sidi,” he continued softly, “there is sometimes another reason—stronger even than the desert.”

I looked at him questioningly, waiting for his words, but for long he stood silent.

“Yes,” he said at length, and his solemnity awed me, “there is another reason—the fate of Kaïs hangs over us all.”

“Kaïs?” I questioned.

“A poet, Sidi; have you never heard the story of his love for Laïla?”

“Never. Come, the wind begins to be cold, let us go into the tent and you will tell me the story of Kaïs.”

In the darkness of the little goat-skin tent I stretched myself on the framework that did duty for a bed. Athman sat in the door-way. Beyond his figure I could see the stars and a peep of moonlit desert. In the hush of the night his voice came to the ear in sad and monotonous cadences. He

did not address himself directly to me, nor did he seem aware of my presence. It was almost as though some unseen power were forcing him to speak—as though he were conscious of the fact that thus, and by no other means, would he find relief from his thoughts.

The tale was told to me in Arabic. I have translated it—and other tales—into English. That they have lost by being so treated, I am only too well aware ; yet I trust that all their charm has not fled—that a little of their old-world, elusive, Oriental atmosphere “ haunts about ” them still.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HISTORY OF THE LOVER OF LAILA.

BE it known unto you that in days bygone there lived a young man belonging to the tribe of Banan-Adhra. Famous was he, not only on account of his beauty, but also because of the excellence of his poetry. His verses sang the secrets of the desert—they interpreted also the desires of men. Yet never had he felt the power of love. Others had he seen sick unto death for the sake of some maiden, but he wandered free as the wind, unshackled by the fetters of desire. Oftentimes sang he with gladsome voice :

“Who is this love that spareth no one ?
 Is she a nymph of the oasis,
 Shrouding in palms—laughing in bubbling water ?
 Is she the mirage that beckoneth at morning ?
 Is she the gazelle that speedeth at noonday ?
 Ever she flies and I follow.
 Fain would I see her face ;
 Fain kiss her hair.
 Stay, O my little one, the coming of my steps.”

Unto every one his destiny—so also with Kaïs.

One day, when Kaïs had attained the age of twenty, he set out mounted on his favourite camel

to visit a neighbouring tribe. As he neared the encampment he perceived the matrons and maidens seated—according to custom—at the door of their tents enjoying the evening breeze. Kaïs gave them salutation, calling upon Allah, the all-merciful, to bear witness to the respect with which they inspired him. They also responded as by politeness bound, entreating him to descend from his camel and entertain them with his conversation. This they did out of honour to the Muse, for a poet is beloved for the sweetness of his songs. With gladsome face Kaïs complied with their request.

Then it was that he first saw Lâila—the beauteous Lâila—compared with whom other maidens were as stars eclipsed by the brightness of the moon. Love claimed him at once and for ever. His knees shook, and within his breast his caged heart fluttered like a captured bird. Dazzled by the brightness of her eyes, his senses swooned. He strove to speak, yet knew not what he said. With parched lips he begged leave to offer a hospitality. Gaining their consent and all unaware of what he did, he killed his beloved camel and offered her flesh to the ladies of the tribe. In so doing, he cut his hand with a deep and grievous cut, yet such was the madness of his passion that he himself was unaware of the injury. Pity, so oftentimes the herald of love, awoke in the heart of Lâila. She divined from his insensibility to pain, how deep was the passion with which she had inspired him. Tearing a piece of cloth from her caftan she bound up the wound. Her hands

touched his—his eyes burned within hers ; Laila, too, fell a victim to the power of love.

Now the tribe to which the maiden belonged had one law of so singular a nature that few there are who will credit it. It held that should a young man love a maiden, he may on no account marry her ; for love before marriage they deemed a shameful thing. In accordance with this law Kaïs was forced to renounce all hope of obtaining Laila as his wife.

Sadly he returned on foot to his tent. Fain would he sleep, but sleep was banished from his eyes ; fain would he eat, but food was distasteful in his sight. Alas, poor Kaïs ! how much was he to be pitied. Where was his heart—where his eyes—where his soul ? Love, the all-powerful, had stolen them for ever. He became the shepherd of the stars. All night long he kept vigil at the door of his tent composing verses in praise of Laila. Can I remember them ? No, they have escaped me. Can one imprison a tear ? Can one fetter a sigh ? Yet, stay, one little verse defies oblivion. Thus it sang :

“ Where is my heart—but now so joyous ?
 Alas woe is me, O my soul !
 The eyes of Laila have enslaved me.
 Where is my heart ? It is no longer here.
 Woe is me, O my soul ! ”

What need to say more ? They were not destined for happiness. Allah, the all-powerful, the compassionate, willed it otherwise. The father of Laila gave her in marriage to another. Kaïs, the unfor-

tunate, lost his wits ; he sought the solitude of the desert and spent his days far from the tents of men.

Time passed on ; the tribe ceased to speak of Kaïs. Men forgot him as they forget a palm-tree, once beautiful, that is no more. But one day, many moons after the events I have recorded, Kathir, the Arab poet, was overheard by the Kalif Ben-Merwan to recite verses in praise of Azza. Now, as was well known, Kathir was mad with love for his cousin Azza, and his name was as a proverb in the land for true love and deep devotion.

"Kathir," said the Kalif Ben-Merwan, "hast thou seen one more deeply enamoured than thou ?"

"Sire," replied Kathir, "permit that I relate to you an adventure that one day befell me. I was wandering in the desert far from sheltering oasis, far also from the tents of men. Cruelly did I suffer from hunger and thirst, nor knew I whither to turn in my hour of need. But, of a sudden, I perceived one before me whom I divined to be a man of great holiness, so wild was his demeanour, so disordered his raiment. Addressing myself unto him, I entreated him in the name of Allah—unto whom be all praise—to relieve my distress. He had a little water in a dish, but he would not permit me to drink of it. "Wait, my son," said he, "until we have eaten." "What is there to eat, O my father ?" questioned I. "Naught as yet," he replied, "but I have set a trap and, if Allah wills, we will soon eat, and that heartily." In silence I

seated myself beside him in a pit which he had dug in the sand. In a little while Destiny—the servant of the most High—permitted a young gazelle to fall into the trap. The hermit released it, but, far from killing it, he fell to embracing it tenderly, kissing its beautiful eyes with many tears and sighing as though his heart would break. Then, having permitted the little creature to drink our water to the last drop, he set it gently at liberty, upon which it trotted away and soon was lost to sight. “What hast thou done, O sainted One?” I cried in despair. “Where is now our water and our food?” “I could not kill it, O my Guest,” he made reply; “it had the eyes of Laïla.”

“In this manner, O Sire,” concluded Kathir, “I made the acquaintance of one—the long-lost Kaïs—more deeply enamoured than myself.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAZY AFRIT.

It was broad day when I awoke. The sun was shining. I blinked through the door of my tent. The peep of oasis which I commanded lay deluged with light. A distant caravan—mere dots on the far horizon—could plainly be distinguished. I watched it disappear over a radiant summit that heaved itself to the westward. For many minutes I lay, drowsily wondering. Why had not Athman awakened me, as was his habit, at daybreak? Then, I remembered. Before we had parted on the previous evening we had agreed that in the interests of sleep we would forego our customary pleasure of assisting at the sunrise. I stretched myself with the utmost contentment, filled with nothing but a kindly feeling towards the great beautiful world that was awaiting me—out there, in the sunshine.

As I lay, semi-dreaming, the sound of laughter came to my ears. It stirred me at once into animation. It was plainly the rollicking laugh of a man, but was accompanied, to my surprise, by the gurgling merriment of children. Again and again

the voices rang out, a gladsome sound according well with the early sunshine and the freshness of the morning. I recognised the laugh for Athman's at once ; but what could he be doing.? My curiosity excited, I sprang from my bed and peeped round the corner of the tent.

There sat my guide upon a fallen palm-tree, surrounded by children. They made the prettiest picture imaginable. The bright colours of their costumes glowed like sunlit flower-petals against the shadows of the palms. The little ones were the same company of parti-coloured atoms that had heralded our arrival with such tremulous satisfaction upon the previous evening. But what had become of their nervousness ? What indeed ? A youthful Arab was leaning both elbows on Athman's knee—the orange-robed one could not press close enough to his mauve-coloured trousers—the still more diminutive negress was reaching out a tiny fist to clutch his hair. Nothing but fearless satisfaction beamed from every face. Again exclamations of delight broke the silence ; he was making them listen to the ticking of his watch.

"Oh-h-h ! wonderful !" gasped she of the orange robe, the watch held tightly to her dusky ear. "Never in all my life have I heard anything like this before. It is so small, and yet it talks without stopping. Wah !"

"Like unto a woman," chuckled a youthful Arab. "My father says that their tongues never sleep."

"I wish to hear. I wish to hear," clamoured a lady-in-waiting, dancing on impatient feet.

"It is not thy turn ; it is mine, O shameless one ! " remonstrated her companion in office.

"No, no ; I have not heard the tick-box for many minutes. Thou hadst it last."

"I had not."

"Thou hadst."

"Silence !" scolded the lemon-coloured cynic with superiority. "We men like not to listen to the wranglings of women."

The woman of six made a face at him, whereupon the man of seven chased her in hot indignation. Lemon-yellow pursuing pale-rose among the palm-trees was like a passage from the life of a butterfly. The pursued sought refuge in Athman's arms, where, from the proud eminence of his knee, she made faces at the pursuer with impunity.

The orange-robe was shaking the watch violently.

"Stop ! stop !" remonstrated Athman, wrestling his property from her grimy paw. "Thou must not do that."

"Why not, Sidi, I want to open it."

"Then will the little Afrit inside be angry."

All the children gazed at the watch with apprehension.

"How did he get inside ? " asked orange-robe in an awestruck voice.

"And what does he eat ? " inquired the cynic with eager interest.

"He was forced to creep though this"—pointing to the keyhole—"it happened long ago when he was very young—as young as thou, O little flower of the desert." He nodded to the wearer of the

emerald robe, who was gazing up in his face with wondering eyes. All the children stared at the flower with the interest of botanists discovering a new specimen. The flower assumed an air of importance. "And," continued Athman, "now that he has grown big he cannot creep out again."

"Poor little Afrit!" murmured the lady on his knee.

"I wonder much what he eats," puzzled the cynic.

"Has he no one to play with?" inquired orange-robe.

"No," said Athman sadly, "he has no one to play with. He is being punished. He was a lazy fellow and would do no work, so a powerful Jinnee called Time shut him into this little box, and he has to work hard to the very end of his life."

"What work does he do?" inquired emerald-robe, gazing at the watch with mingled feelings of sympathy and apprehension.

"He has to count the minutes, every one of them, all day and all night. He has not even time to sleep. Afrits are like children: if they will not work then are they punished."

"That is true talk," assented orange-robe ruefully. "I have to carry this little one on my back; she is heavy. Sometimes my back aches and I put her down—then am I slapped." She rubbed a portion of her small anatomy and sighed deeply.

"And *we* help at the date-harvest, and fetch water, and dig in the barley fields, and herd the camels—Oh, we are *most* useful!" chorussed the youthful Arabs.

"I too work," lisped the lady-in-waiting with pride.

"What great work dost thou do, O little heart's delight?" chuckled Athman, caressing the small black head that nestled against his shoulder.

"I help mine own mother to make cous-cous."

"Aye, and to eat most of it too, as we all have seen," sneered the cynic.

She struck at him with a naked foot.

"Be quiet, bad boy, or I tell the Sidi who stole the apricots."

"By Allah!" swore the cynic, "I will surely beat thee when the Sidi goes away."

Tears gathered in the lady's eyes.

"Cry not, little one," soothed Athman, winding an arm round her. "And thou," shaking a finger at the tormentor, "talk not in this unseemly manner, or I will tell the Afrits to pinch thee in thy sleep."

This threat left the delinquent open-mouthed.

"Tell us a story, O Sidi," pleaded orange-robe. "Our father says that thou canst tell the most beautiful stories."

"Yes," cried they all, "a story! a story!"

Athman laughed good-humouredly.

"No, no, little tyrants; already have I spent too much time with you. I, too, must work, or the Jinnee will of a surety shut me up in a tick-box. Be off now, and when I come back again I promise to tell you a story."

The children dispersed in the direction of the Bordj. But before they had gone many yards the

lady-in-waiting who had sat on his knee stopped, hesitated, looked shyly round, then running back threw her arms round his neck, crying impulsively :

“ I love thee. I do love thee. Thou art a kind man ! ”

CHAPTER XV.

CHANCE ENCOUNTERS.

IT was my habit to start in the early morning hours a considerable time before Athman and Abdullah took to the road. They both had duties to perform : Athman to pack the tent and my various belongings, Abdullah to water and attend to the creature-comforts of the camels. I was glad to stride away into the great empty spaces, for being alone I could, as I imagined, more thoroughly realise the desert.

The crystalline purity of the air, the strong illumination, the absolute silence, affected me beyond words. They filled my heart with solemn glee, an emotion at once joyous and awe-inspiring. The joyousness however predominated. Exhilaration raced in the blood. In such wonderful air one scoffed at the possibility of ever becoming tired. Athman worded this sensation with happy directness. One morning he caught me up, running at the top of his speed. "Sidi!" he panted, "one is obliged to run here; yes, and even to jump. To walk does not express the feelings. Hola!" and off he sped, careering along the sandy soil and springing over the boulders that lay in his path.

At such times the sun was by no means the tyrant that he became at less favoured hours of the day. He was, it is true, well above the horizon, and his beams deluged the world, but he dispensed nothing but happiness, and I invariably regarded him as a friend.

Each little bush cast its long shadow westwards. My own shadow was appalling—so mal-formed and far-reaching that the wonder was that six feet of mere mortality should be held responsible for its Frankenstein existence.

It was delightful to stop after I had walked a few miles, to gaze around, and to feel that in point of enjoyment it all belonged to me. The oasis had disappeared, lost to sight behind a great undulation; no signs of habitation were to be seen; no track of man or beast, save a worn rut or two, wrinkling the soil; or perchance the bones of some poor camel bleaching in the sunshine. In the strong young light everything was visible; from the far crests, pencilling the blue, to the stones at one's feet, each sun-tipped, each with its little attendant shadow. Oh, the freshness, the fragrance, the physical joyousness that fell with the light and raced with the breeze! The beauty of it all! The great kind world smiling in the sun! One's whole inward being sprang to welcome it; it seemed impossible to credit the existence of darkness and death. No! in such a world it must be always sunshine—always morning!

I was by this time well out upon the high sea of the desert. But the word desert, of which I have

oftentimes made use, is misleading. To the popular imagination this was no desert. Here was no flat illimitable space encircled by the sweep of a fixed horizon. Here were no hills of sand—sand deep and fine as that which forms itself into dunes on our northern shores ; but long undulations rolling upwards in gentle acclivities, shrub-bedecked, boulder-strewn, subsiding gently into the sweep of spacious valleys—the playground of the sunshine and the breeze.

Look where one would, the eyes rested only on swelling summits and sinking hollows, of no great depth or height, yet of sufficient amplitude to conceal an army. The pervading colour was grey, the dull, monotonous and dusty grey of the desert ; yet such was the clarity of the atmosphere, such the witchcraft of the sun, that the scene spoke to the imagination with a charm peculiarly its own. Nor was it entirely destitute of colour, for as I topped a long rise, the extreme distance swung into sight, and for a moment I stood spell-bound, lost in admiration of the delicate shades of purple and azure that melted into the morning sky.

Far to the southward—many weeks' journey—lay the Great Sahara, in all its mystery and loneliness ; but this was only the valley of the Oued Rir, the Algerian Sahara, the antechamber, as it were, to the vast halls that stretched beyond.

Upon the morning on which I left Ain-Chegga I walked even farther than usual. But I did not weary, nor was I entirely without company. The first indications of life, other than mine, were two

Arabs of the better sort mounted on high-spirited barbs, proceeding in the direction of Biskra. I was toiling up the back of a long incline when of a sudden they came cantering over the brow immediately before me. The effect was startling. It was as though the stones of the desert had metamorphosed themselves into mounted men. On they came, horses prancing, garments aflutter, riders swaying gracefully in the high-peaked saddles. Snow-white haïks encircled their dark immovable faces. Immense iron stirrups beat time upon the sweating flanks. Grasped in their left hands were long Arab guns, inlaid, picturesque, winking in reflected sunlight. I stared at them with wide eyes. I doubt not but that they were equally surprised to see me, for they returned my stare with interest, and as they swept past one of them, standing high in his stirrups and waving his gun, shouted : "Salaam Alekoom"—the courteous salutation of the East.

I turned and watched them as they cantered down the hill. The sun gleamed on their white draperies ; the dust of their passage drifted gently over the stunted shrubs ; their shadows kept pace with them hotly. For long I gave ear to the noise of hoofs ringing on the stones, till a downward bend snatched men and horses from me. Still I listened, and still I fancied I could hear a dying tinkle ; then, even that died away, beaten down by the appalling silence of the desert.

My next chance meeting took a more sociable turn. I encountered a caravan of camels. I espied them from afar, mere dots upon the sky-line.

I lost and re-found them near a dozen times. Now would they dip into a hollow, and the lifelessness of the desert struck home to the senses, and again would they creep into sight, and the heart warmed at the promise of nearing animation. Every moment added to their significance in the landscape. Details introduced themselves. A speckled object that for long puzzled me, proved to be a piebald camel; a point of red-hot flame, that fettered attention like an indignant eye, grew into a couple of scarlet bags suspended one on either side of a pack-saddle.

Slowly they approached, the animals cropping the wayside shrubs, the men stalking in the rear, with every now and again a forward rush to beat a delinquent from a too fascinating bush. When we were come to close quarters they clustered around me. They were picturesque fellows, burned to extreme swarthinness, lean as greyhounds, with muscles like whipcord, immensely dignified, immensely dirty.

There was something so wild in their appearance, so lawless, so brigand-like, that they came near to alarming me. In my uneasiness I cast a hasty backward glance in the direction of Ain-Chegga. But no—no signs of my escort were to be seen. The little oasis had long since vanished, swallowed up in the trough between two mighty billows. The rolling desert, with its dusty shrubs and grey rocks, lay empty, bare, blistering in sunlight. I was alone, and to my anxious eye the place seemed peculiarly suited for murder.

I had however no cause for apprehension. My fellow-travellers were influenced by no more hostile feelings than a lively curiosity, not unmixed with amazement.

“From whence dost thou come, O Nazarene?” A tall wild-eyed son of the desert hailed me in a voice that was at once shrill and guttural.

“And whither dost thou go?” clamoured a little man, gaunt to emaciation. I satisfied their curiosity. The tall man nodded his head.

“Biskra I know. We go there, even now, for merchandise. Tougourt likewise is familiar to me—by repute. It lieth far off, over there.” He jerked his shoulder to where the desert hazed to the southward. “But,” and he gazed long at me, unaffected wonder shining in his eyes, “but what does the Sidi here? How cometh it that he is on foot and—and alone?”

They awaited my reply with open mouths. I was struck with the picturesqueness of the group. The ragged burnouses, the lean, sinewy limbs, the fine-featured faces, so impassive in repose, so animated in action; the air of being sun-steeped and travel-stained, drunken with day-long draughts of desert wind—all attracted me strongly. The sunlight beat upon them. Their shadows fell black on the sandy soil. Farther off the camels browsed at will in a shimmer of heat.

I explained the situation.

“It passeth comprehension,” grunted the tall man, and he scratched himself with the tentative touch of a chess-player pondering a move. Then,

with a farewell glance of dignified wonderment, he turned away, and his voice rang shrill as he belaboured his camel from a bush. The others followed him. The caravan resumed its march. Before they had gone many paces, however, the little man turned back. He approached me with the air of one who fain would ask a favour.

"Sidi," he said, "dost thou smoke?"

I confessed to the habit.

"Then," he cried, stretching out a dirty hand, "give me, I pray thee, tobacco craftily concealed in finely-rolled paper."

I searched for a cigarette, but finding none, offered him my tobacco-pouch. He eyed it with dull suspicion.

"Allah!" he cried harshly, "what is this?"

I opened it. Uttering an ejaculation of surprise, he inserted his fingers into the pouch, withdrew a quantity of tobacco, which he at once concealed in the capote of his burnous, then ran after his comrades.

I seated myself on a boulder and watched them dwindle into the distance. How leisurely they marched! and yet with what steadiness they covered the ground! Soon they were but moving dots on a far sky-line. Even as I gazed, the desert appeared to rise in a long wave and the caravan sank from sight. Yet, though no longer to be seen, my thoughts followed it. Slowly, ceaselessly, would it wander on until nightfall; and, had it but water sufficient, where night found it, there would it camp. This phase of the desert struck me forcibly.



"It would wander on."

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It is to its children a vast caravanserai, a great sleeping-place, warmed by the sun, watched over by the quiet stars—a promise and fulfilment of rest. It differs from the ocean in that, while the great spaces of water are the scene of ceaseless voyaging both day and night, the great spaces of sand are themselves a nightly bourne, taking weary travellers to their breast and sending them forth on the morrow with renewed energy for the toil of yet another day. The caravan halts nightly. By a clump of isolated palms, in the shelter of some sand-dune, or far out in the voiceless wastes, the word is given, and the wanderers lie down and sleep. Mystery and loneliness keep watch ; blue glooms beckon from the wilds ; silence stands sentinel, while overhead the stars come out in their companies and make night beautiful with their shining.

And even as a phase once presented to our notice recurs not unfrequently—as though circumstances wished to corroborate by fresh evidence the new light in which they are able to appear—so this aspect of the desert was brought home to me again before the lapse of many hours. That evening we decided to camp in the open, influenced by the waning light and by the contiguity of a well of brackish water. No sooner had we pitched our tent, than out of the wide inanimate came a caravan of five camels, followed by three Arabs. They halted at the well, distant some twenty paces from our camp. Here they unloaded the animals, making but a single pile of the “telis,” or large sacks which contained their merchandise. Upon this hard bed

the men stretched themselves. The animals, relieved of their burdens, began at once to graze. No fire was lighted, no sign of a camp met the eye—only the strange forms of the camels wandering at will among the shrubs, and the pile of sacks, on which lay the three motionless figures. In a short time the animals, having satisfied their hunger, joined their masters and grouped themselves round the sacks. The silence was profound. The men were doubtless weary, and sank at once into the dreamless sleep that follows hard upon long marches ; for although I crept nearer and nearer, and listened in the gathering dusk, all was still—no one moved. On the following morning, at break of day, I looked for them, but they were already far distant, dwindling into insignificance, where plain met sky in the south-east.

CHAPTER XVI.

BESIDE THE BORDJ OF SEKIL.

THE Bordj of Sekil basked, and baked, and blistered. The African sun struck at it fiercely, bullied it, till it woke from its Eastern lethargy and flashed resentment from the eye of a new water-spout. A dull wave of heat quivered along the ground, in which every rock, bush, and tiny stone trembled into elusive animation. Some places are difficult to describe tersely—not so Sekil. Description exhausts itself in a couple of lines. An ugly building—half prison, half stable—a well of brackish water ; a square of filthy court-yard ; and around—nothing, to north, south, east, or west, save the wide, rolling, desolate, glaring desert.

The old man whose duties were to guard the Bordj, to keep the well free from contamination, and to warn the military authorities of the presence of disaffected persons, received us with unexpected graciousness. He was a connection of Athman's, hence his unusual friendliness. He possessed two wives, but he kept them jealously concealed within that part of the prison-like structure allotted for his personal use. I looked at the ugly building with

interest ; no sound came from it ; nothing was visible which might lead one to suppose that women were hidden there. And yet, it was more than probable that from behind these prison bars they were peeping at us, wondering who we might be that so unexpectedly came out of the desert solitudes to make a momentary stir in the quiet current of their lives.

With kindly hospitality, the guardian set thin Arab cakes, camel's milk, and dates before us ; and even went the length of joining us in our repast. He, however, ate sparingly—merely touching the milk with his lips, and placing a few crumbs within his mouth, that all due observances might be fulfilled.

Accompanying him was his daughter, a dainty little creature of some seven years. With her Athman struck up an immediate friendship. Hand in hand, they started on a visit of ceremony to a dog, three puppies and a kid. The old man and I were left alone.

“ Has the noble Sidi beheld my oasis ? ” he inquired, touching me on the arm, his face lighting with interest. My eyes sought the Bordj. Its surroundings were bare, monotonous, desolate ; exposed to sun and storm. It was an open boat upon the rolling desert sea. No touch of kindly green rewarded the sight. His words awoke wonder. I looked into his face and shook my head.

My surprise pleased the old man. He rubbed his brown hands, chuckling merrily the while.

“ Follow me, O Sidi ! ” he cried, and, without waiting for a reply, hobbled rapidly to the brow of

a little hill. Reaching the summit, he waved his arms.

“Behold !” he panted breathlessly. “My oasis ! my little oasis !”

Upon the farther side, and shielded from the north and east by the rising ground upon which we stood, was indeed an oasis. But a very baby among oases ! There were in all two dozen date palms ; the tallest did not exceed five feet in height. They were planted in trenches, equidistant, and with room for sun and rain to visit each at will. But—they had not thrived.

“Beautiful ! beautiful !” murmured the old man. “O Sidi,” he turned to me, pride and satisfaction shining in his eyes, “when Allah willed it that I should come here, I wept. My home has always been among the palms. Then I dreamt that I—even I—possessed an oasis. That dream gave me courage ; I saved money ; I bought palms ; I planted them beside the well. Sidi, they drooped ; the winter is too cold there ; the north wind sought them out in their extreme youth. It was written.” He shook his head and sighed deeply. Then, his face brightening, he continued : “At length I bethought me of this little hill. The ground promised well. With grievous toil I brought them hither. They will bring forth fruit in due season. They bore the journey bravely. They are thirsty little trees ; we give them to drink every night. In the fulness of time, they will repay. A sooth-sayer told me that my dream would without fail come to pass. It is the desire of my old age to eat

but once of the fruit of my trees, and to rest in the shadow of their branches. Allah knows it. Sidi, I have worshipped him for eighty years—he will not disappoint me now—blessed for ever be his holy name. Allah ! Allah ! ”

He again stretched out his arms towards the little oasis. His eyes rested on the brown and withering leaves. His expression told of nothing but trust and hope.

Noon-day gasped upon the desert. Athman and I sat in the shadow of the Bordj. The old man and his little daughter had sought shelter from the heat within doors. At a distance of a dozen yards stood my tent. Within its shadow lay a bundle of rags. Protruding from them, a lean leg, terminating in Abdullah's sandal, gave a clue to their identity.

Athman and I had no monopoly of tepid shadow—we shared it with a number of dejected hens. These pitiable fowls viewed our advent with apprehension, not sufficiently powerful to induce them to brave the outer fire, but strong enough to drive them into the remotest confines of shadow-land. In a melancholy row they lay, their heads abased to the dust, their beaks open, a feathered protest against the tyranny of the sun.

I looked at Athman. He squatted at my side in Eastern fashion, sitting literally on the tendons of his heels. He had changed his mauve costume for one of white cotton, immaculately clean ; his red fez, however, still perched jauntily on his woolly hair. The eyes rested on him with pleasure, so

cool and summer-like was his appearance. He had forgotten me. A scrap of paper rested on his knees ; a pencil was between his fingers ; poetry bubbled from his lips.

" O Lala ! " he muttered in Arabic as he wrote, " my little Lala, whom I have not yet seen, my heart pains me with longing for thee, even as—even as——" he sucked the pencil-end in perplexity, his dark eyes gazed into the sunshine with a light that was luminous yet vague—then, with a rush, " Even as the desert burning at noonday faints for the pale embraces of the moon."

With a sigh of satisfaction he held the poem at arm's-length and viewed it admiringly with tilted head.

The shadow of the Bordj crept stealthily eastwards. One of the camels, bitten by another, snarled savagely. The sound broke the immense voicelessness but for a fleeting moment. The spell of noonday weighted the eyelids. The breath of the sleeping desert lapped us round like the waters of a warm tideless sea.

It came to my mind, suddenly, how strange it was to be sitting there, far out on the Algerian Sahara. How far removed from former experiences was that moment of conscious sensation. How it would return to haunt me, long afterwards, when burning suns and desert marches were things of the past.

In the midst of such musings sleep beset me, but unwilling to succumb I jerked myself into wakefulness.

"Athman!" I cried.

"Sidi?"—his tone was impatient.

"Tell me an Arab story."

"*Mon Dieu!*" he gesticulated with sudden heat.

"Do you not see that I am making poetry!"

I laughed aloud. Athman was visibly annoyed. To make light of his poetry was, in his eyes, the one unpardonable sin. With an exclamation of anger he flung the pencil on the sand and, springing to his feet, stalked to the shadow-margin of the Bordj.

"Athman," I called.

"Sidi?"—his voice was sulky.

"Come here; I have something to say to you."

He looked at me with suspicion, through which I read awakening curiosity. Then, very slowly, he retraced his steps.

"Athman," I said, "tell me the story first, and then perhaps you would read me some of your poetry afterwards."

His eyes brightened.

"Certainly," he cried. "What sort of story shall it be? I know many. Something tragic perhaps? I can relate to you one with at least two deaths in it. It is very beautiful. It touches me."

Upon my raising objections, he pondered long; then, of a sudden, he gave a joyous shout.

"I have found it. It is just what you like. No one is killed, although, to be sure, the wolf is——"

"Its name?" I interrupted.

"It is the History of the Lion, the Wolf, and the Fox."

Encouraged by my approval, he launched himself at once upon the ocean of Oriental anecdote. My knowledge of Arabic stumbled after his eager words.

THE HISTORY OF THE LION, THE WOLF, AND THE FOX.

Be it known unto thee that in days gone by, the Lion, the Wolf, and the Fox went forth to hunt. Allah crowned their efforts with success. By evening they had captured a donkey, a gazelle, and a hare.

"Wolf," growled the Lion, "thou seest our captures, make, we pray thee, a fair division of the spoil." "Hearing is obedience, O my Lord!" quoth the Wolf complacently. "Thou, being the greatest, wilt in all justice take the donkey: I, coming next in stature, will take the gazelle: the Fox, being wholly insignificant, must needs content himself with the hare."

Loudly snarled the Lion in sore displeasure. Lifting up his mighty paw, he dealt the Wolf a blow so terrible that, tearing one eye from its socket, it cast it all bleeding on the sand.

"Fox," roared the King of Beasts, "thou seest our dilemma, assist us, we pray thee, with thy advice." "Hearing is obedience, O most mighty Sultan!" assented the Fox with a modest smile. "My advice is that thou takest the donkey for thy break-

fast, the gazelle for thy dinner, and the hare for thy supper."

The Lion purred for very pleasure. "By Allah!" cried he, his whiskers bristling with satisfaction, "O, little Fox, how full art thou of wisdom! Verily, thy division is most just—most excellent. It remindeth me of the mighty Suliman. Tell us, we pray thee, where didst thou seek inspiration?" "Sire," answered the Fox, waving his paw towards the blood-stained sand, "I sought inspiration in the eye of the Wolf."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DEATH OF THE TOAD.

THE fleeting after-glow was a thing of the past. Seated on a crest of a desert wave I watched the approach of night. Below me, in the trough of the sandy sea, the Bordj of Sekil slowly effaced itself. My tent and the recumbent forms of the camels were already indistinguishable, merged into the general obscurity.

Yet, though alone and cut off from human companionship, I did not feel deserted, for, as darkness fell, the surrounding gloom was cheered by a kindly twinkle. Athman had not forgotten our camp-fire.

For long I sat, enjoying the loneliness, the silence, and the night; pleasurably conscious of the fact that I had come a little closer to this great mysterious thing—the desert. At length, wearying of inaction, I retraced my steps towards the camp. As I neared it I was startled by the sound of voices—muffled—hoarse—menacing, as though raised in sudden anger. Involuntarily I quickened my steps. Again the voices reached me, and by this time I thought I could distinguish the shrill raucous

tones of Abdullah, mingling with the deeper notes of Athman, distorted as it appeared by passion.

As I approached, the light of the fire flickered high, and I saw the two men standing together within the luminous circle. Their fierce gesticulations but emphasised the ominous sounds I had heard. Before I could reach them the shadow that I recognised as Athman sprang suddenly upon the shadow that I knew for Abdullah. The Arab fell like a log.

I ran forward. Athman was uppermost; his hands were upon the Arab's throat; with all the strength of his powerful arms he was shaking his adversary as a terror might shake a rat.

"Athman!" I shouted.

He did not heed me. From between his clenched teeth issued panting ejaculations—inarticulate—furious. I feared for Abdullah. His eyes started from his head; his thin sinewy legs were drawn up as though in the extremity of torture; his desperate struggles were as nothing under the vice-like hands that clutched at the life within his throat.

Again I shouted—and again my remonstrances were unheeded. Abdullah's face was painful to behold. He had ceased to struggle.

Laying hold of Athman by the collar of his jacket, and putting forth all my strength, I succeeded in shifting him. His collar tore across. Athman grunted loudly, then struggled to his feet, still retaining hold of his foe. For a moment he stood irresolute, clutching the limp inanimate mass. Then, suddenly making up his mind, he

flung him with a final imprecation into the darkness. I watched him fall, fearful lest he might never rise again. But as I looked he disappeared. There remained only Athman standing in the light of the fire.

"Now," said I sternly, "explain this."

"Explain it," he cried hotly, still breathless from the struggle. "*Mon Dieu!* that explains it."

He pointed vehemently at the ground. A dark object lay within a yard of the fire. Gingerly I picked it up. It was a dead toad.

"Ah! the son of a dog!" snarled Athman, with a howl of indignation, "may jackals defile his father's grave!—may the head of his grandfather burn to all eternity!—may the women of his tribe be——"

"Did he kill it?" I interrupted.

"Kill it!" he roared. "He tortured it!"

"Tortured it?"

"Yes, to the death, Sidi."

Then, in the firelight, Athman told me of the inhumanity of Abdullah.

It appeared that the Arab had discovered the toad lurking under a stone. He had pounced upon it with glee, being determined to put in practice a cruel pastime much affected by his fellows. It is as follows:—The toad is dragged from its retreat and a lighted cigarette carefully inserted within its mouth. The cigarette once in position, the animal is unable to expel it. Being under the necessity to breathe, it struggles for air; its efforts, however, but succeed in drawing smoke into its lungs. The

more it struggles, the faster it smokes. In its agony it becomes desperate. Its eyes protrude from its head ; its body begins to swell. But there is no escape. No pity is to be read in the circle of laughing faces who gloat over its sufferings. Fortunately death comes quickly to its rescue.

Such was the performance that Athman had disturbed. His account was graphic. I saw Abdullah gloating over his victim, his clear-cut features and black eyes lit with the light of cruelty. I saw the glow of the cigarette, coming ever nearer, dulling and brightening as the frenzied animal sucked at the death between its lips ; I saw the last stage of all, the final asphyxiation, the poor, helpless, dumb thing laying down its life upon the altar of man's undying cruelty. And so seeing I found no words to blame Athman.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE INCIDENT OF THE MEERSCHAUM PIPE.

IT was during our stay at Sekil that a regrettable incident occurred. Entering my tent in the later afternoon I saw my pipe-case lying on my bed. This surprised me, for I had no recollection of having left it there. Upon opening it, I discovered my meerschaum to be broken. There he lay, poor little negro, his head severed from his neck, as hopelessly decapitated as though he had perished under the guillotine. I gazed at him in consternation. The smile was still there. It touched the heart. My first feeling was one of sorrow, my second of indignation. How came he to be broken? There was but one solution. Someone had tampered with him in my absence. My suspicions rested on Athman; no one but he had free access to my tent. I determined to find out.

"Athman," I called.

He came running out of the sunshine. When he caught sight of me, the pipe-case in my hand and sorrow in my face, he came abruptly to a standstill. Apprehension imprinted itself on every fea-

ture. His black fingers twisted and untwisted the ends of his sash. He looked for all the world like a child discovered in wrong-doing. At last, with an effort, he spoke :

“ What is it, Sidi ? ”

“ My pipe is broken.”

“ It is not possible ! ” he ejaculated, but there was a want of sincerity in his voice.

“ Someone has broken it,” I continued ; “ do you know how it happened ? ”

He took a step forward and examined the fragments with interest.

“ Poor little negro,” he murmured ; “ he has the air of one who has suffered a fall ; yes, that is precisely it, Sidi, a fall—a bad fall ! ”

He spoke hurriedly, as though he feared direct accusation. His eyes avoided mine. I was filled with disappointment. He had endeared himself to me in so many ways that I was loth to think him capable of deceit. Sooner would I have lost a regiment of little negroes. And yet there was no mistaking his manner ; he plainly did not intend to confess.

I sat on the edge of the bed watching him, hoping that he would tell me the truth ; he stood by my side, examining the pipe, which he had taken into his hands, with a comical mixture of remorse and admiration. Once he glanced furtively in my direction, but his eyes meeting mine, and reading doubtless the reproach imprinted within them, he fell to inspecting the remains with renewed attention. For some time we stood thus. The silence was

becoming oppressive, when all of a sudden he laughed, a long, chuckling laugh of unaffected amusement. I stared at him in astonishment. He had forgotten my displeasure; he had put all disagreeable facts behind him with the easy forgetfulness of youth, chained only to the immediate sensations of the present. His strong white teeth gleamed; his eyes all but disappeared. Again the laugh gurgled forth: "He! he! he! He! he! he!" It was the most rollicking and irrepressible sound that can be imagined; yet, at the moment, I resented it. Before I could express my indignation he burst forth:

"Look, Sidi, look at his little face; you would say that it was joyous because he knows that now he can never become quite black. Ah, I can understand that! To be a negro is so terrible."

His laughter and the gay irresponsibility of his tone went far to arouse my anger. That he should have beheaded my laughing philosopher was an injury, but that he should chuckle over the remains was an insult.

"Put the pipe down," I said sternly.

He started and his jaw fell. Never before had I spoken to him thus.

"You broke it."

"But, Sidi, I did not mean—I——" Words failed him; he completed the sentence with an appealing gesture of the hands. The visible consternation in his face would at other times have predisposed me to leniency, but indignation was hot within me.

"Yes, you did," I insisted; "and not only did you break it, but you tried to deceive me—to *act a lie*! Oh, Athman!"—my voice expressed reproach—"I would not have believed it of you. You have disappointed me. I treated you like an equal, and you have behaved like—like a negro!"

The words had no sooner left my lips than I regretted them; I wished them back. Considering the strength of his racial prejudices, his rooted antipathy to negroes, they were ungenerous—nay, more; they were cruel. Athman flinched like a man struck unawares; then his hands clenched and his broad chest heaved with sudden passion. The sight of his anger cooled me. I waved my hand towards the door.

"Be so good as to leave me," I said gravely.

For a moment he made no movement. His eyes glittered. There was that in his face which not only made me ashamed of having wounded his feelings, but even aroused my unwilling admiration. A nobility of reproach, a heat of righteous indignation was eloquent to the observer. From his point of view I was distinctly the aggressor. He had indeed broken my pipe, but after all it was an accident, and surely such an accident might happen to anyone? What, then, was the reason of my anger? He could not understand, and in his case lack of comprehension flamed into resentment. He took a hasty step forward; his mouth opened, but no sound escaped it. For the space of a minute he stood before me, rocked to and fro by the intensity of his feelings. Then with an upward

and indignant gesture of the hands, he abruptly left the tent.

Darkness had fallen. Seated in my tent I was engaged in writing a letter, to be transmitted by the Arab diligence. A lighted candle, placed upon a box at my bedside, cast a flickering and uncertain glow around the interior of the little goat-skin dwelling. A great moth, denizen of the desert, invaded my privacy. It seemed bent upon suicide. Again and again it dashed itself at the flame, but failing through sheer precipitation to achieve martyrdom, it clung to the low roof of the tent, its wings quivering, the image of nervous depression.

Beyond the raised door-flap of the tent the desert lay asleep in all the mystery of the moon. The absolute peacefulness of the hour surpassed comprehension. The great tired world was tucked in silvery sheets of moonlight. It was fast asleep. If I listened intently I could hear the soft coming and going of its breath, a slumbrous sound infinitely soothing to weary senses. The beauty of the night awoke a desire for sympathetic companionship. "Why is not Athman here?" I thought. "How he would enjoy this." Then I remembered. He had broken my pipe. I had not seen him for several hours; not since I had commanded him to leave me. My anger however had not diminished; with it was mingled more than a touch of annoyance that an altercation with a guide should have the power to weigh thus heavily on my spirits. I was conscious of a sense of loneliness, almost as though I had lost a friend.

Suddenly I became aware of someone standing in the doorway. It was Athman. After a moment's hesitation he came in, bringing the customary hot water which he had heated over a little fire of palm-branches. His experience as a waiter had given him a certain deftness of movement, quick yet silent, that invariably pleased me. His duties finished, he lingered by my side. I would not raise my eyes ; but, on the contrary, feigned thorough absorption in my work. For long no one spoke. The moth made another desperate attempt at suicide. Athman captured it. Curiosity forced me to look up. He made a little temporary home for the insect between his inverted hands, taking the greatest care lest he should injure its wings ; then carrying it to the door he very gently set it at liberty. Having accomplished this errand of mercy, he returned to my side. With a jerk, my eyes reverted to my work, in mortal fear lest he should read the approval that lurked within them. Again a silence fell, broken at intervals by the clearing of Athman's throat. At length he spoke.

" You find this pretty, Sidi ? " in his voice was a wistfulness that aroused compassion.

I raised my eyes. He was holding out a purse for my inspection. I recognised it at once. It was his own purse, a dainty article in gazelle skin ornamented with Arab embroidery. I had admired it on more than one occasion, although I had not expressed my admiration. My first impulse was to reply in the affirmative, but the memory of my pipe

rose to my mind. Was not this diplomatic change of subject but another proof of his inability to recognise the enormity of his conduct? I looked coldly at him, although I was conscious of much inward sympathy. He stood before me, still holding out the purse. The wistfulness which I had noted in his voice appeared also in his face. His expression was that of a child, who knows that he is in disgrace, yet hopes for forgiveness. I wavered, but the ashes of resentment were not yet cold; I hardened my heart.

"You find it pretty?" he repeated anxiously.

"No," I replied.

Disappointment swept over him. He looked long at the little purse as though he were endeavouring to see it in a new and unfavourable light. The effort was not successful. He shook his head sadly, and restored it to his sash.

"I hoped so much that you would find it pretty," he said at length. "It was for you. I know that it is not so nice as the little negro; but as it is one of the few pretty things which I have of my very own, I hoped that you would take it to show that—that you forgive."

His voice softened; the last words were barely audible. A silence fell. I sat still, my eyes fixed on the moonlight, uncertain what to say. Athman stood by my side—waiting. All at once I heard him sigh. I looked up. He was passing dejectedly from the tent. Contrition seized me.

"Athman," I cried.

"Sidi"—he wheeled towards me.

“Athman, it is pretty. May I have it ? ”

“Oh, Sidi ! ” He laughed aloud in sheer joy. Impulsively he sprang towards me, placed the little gift in my outstretched hand, laughed again, his face radiant in the candle-light, then ran out into the night.



"She yawned often."

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CHAPTER XIX.

THE LAKE OF SALT.

THE start at dawn, the morning cup of coffee, the packing of the tent, the roaring of the camels, the screams of Abdullah, the settling myself upon my precarious seat and being lurched upwards as my camel struggled to her feet, and finally the balancing onward movement as we swayed gently away into the young sunlight—all was as it had been many times before.

There even was the baggage-camel, stretching, as was her custom, distended jaws at the universe. She yawned often. Even of a morning before she was laden she would interrupt a roar to indulge in a yawn. In her eyes desert marches appeared but as a mere weariness of the flesh, and in her awkward stumbling way she endeavoured to show us that they were repellent to her. She protested against them with her whole body, from the bridge of her supercilious nose to the tip of her dejected tail. I felt sorry for her. I could imagine no worse fate than to be born a camel, and yet to be bored with the desert.

Athman was in the best of spirits. To all appearances he had completely forgotten and forgiven

the episode of the pipe. His was no nature to cherish resentment. No past unpleasantness had the power to cloud the gay irresponsibility of his mind. Though no words of reconciliation had taken place, yet in his heart he realised that I regretted the thoughtless expression that had given him pain. The only visible effect of the estrangement was that in the future we were, if possible, more in touch with each other than before.

Athman possessed to an extreme degree that faculty of youth, the capability of living entirely within the present. The past for him had no real value, save such fictitious interest as poetical thoughts might attach to it. The future, too, although it beckoned always with maiden fingers, had no tangible form like the warm breathing present ; to him it was lost in poetical metaphor, the alluring mirage of hope, the morning mists of rose-coloured anticipation. As I came to know him better, his character struck me as entirely undeveloped, unmoulded by experience. So far he had but sported upon the surface of life, yet his conversation was often of the deeps below. Love, jealousy, sorrow, despair—he would rhyme you them by the hour, yet not one of them had touched him. At one moment, with infinite satisfaction, he created for himself a fictitious atmosphere of sensation, purely poetical, purely of the imagination ; at the next, he was crooning some merry song, or pursuing a desert rat with shouts of excitement. The incongruity of it amused me ; it was so boyish, so fresh, so young.

And yet at far intervals there were touches of deeper feeling, momentary gleams of passion, flashes of evanescent fire, which gave one food for thought. Would experience one day set her seal upon him? Would there come an hour when this dreamer of dreams would awaken for ever?

Slowly Sekil drifted back into the unreality of the past. Already the tiny Bordj was lost to sight in the immensities of its surroundings. The camels, with long outstretched necks, stalked silently forwards. It always interested me to look down past my knee and see with what leisurely grace of movement the slender legs succeeded each other; how stately and fastidious was each step; how the great spongy feet silently caressed the ground; and, finally, how the two toes of each foot parted and broadened beneath our weight. The head, the curious antediluvian head, undulated gently onwards. At times my steed superciliously surveyed the landscape, then I caught sight of its profile. Its appearance opened the doors of thought. For what inscrutable reason had the Almighty stamped it with such immeasurable disdain, such lofty and supernatural contempt? What thoughts—the concentrated sum of camel experience, the gleanings of a life spent between burning sun and burning desert—peeped from out those dark hostile eyes.

We paused upon an eminence. My eyes eagerly swept the unknown vistas that lay ahead.

“A lake!” I shouted in surprise. “And in the middle of the Sahara!”

The ground upon which our camels stood sloped abruptly to the margin of what appeared to be a vast sheet of water. Under the vertical rays of the sun the wide expanse glittered with intolerable brilliance. It resembled an enormous mirror, or sheet of burnished steel, flashing in the powerful light. The eyes shrank from its fierce radiance. Calm and unruffled it lay before us, peaceful as a summer sea, stretching away to the horizon on our extreme left. Here and there, far off in the wonderful brightness, swam little islets that trembled through a veil of heat. From our vantage point could be seen the curve of its bays stretching southwards, the dun sand of the desert fringed with the whiteness of seeming foam. Over all brooded utter desolation. No signs of life could be descried. No bird or beast, no human habitation lent a kindly interest to the scene. Nothing but loneliness, intensified by an almost audible silence, made itself felt. Little wonder that I stood there spell-bound. It seemed scarcely of this world—a dream-land landscape, a frozen sea, perchance, lying lost among the mountains of the moon.

Athman, lolling in his saddle, chuckled at my surprise.

“That is no lake, Sidi. It is not even water.”

“A mirage,” I ejaculated. My thoughts flew to all I had heard tell of the desert mirage. I had hoped to see one, but never did I imagine it to possess the marvellous semblance of reality that characterised this glittering lake.

Athman chuckled again.

"It is not a mirage, Sidi. It is the Chott Melgai ; it is full of the crystals of salt."

"Yes," he continued, "it is no wonder you are surprised. It astonishes everyone, even the celebrated Mr. Wilson, with whom I travelled to Tougourt, now many months ago."

Then, in reply to my questions, he informed me that he had been engaged as guide to an English author of some celebrity who had crossed the Algerian Sahara in the early spring. The Englishman had treated him well ; Athman was loud in his praise.

"You have a high opinion of him," I observed.

"It is not astonishing, Sidi ; he is going to make me famous."

I expressed incredulity. Athman burned to convince me.

"It is true, Sidi. He told me so himself. And then, too, he wrote much about me : all that I said, and did, and even what I wore. *Tiens !* this blue burnous and my old fez, which I have had for the last ten years ; he has them all down in his book. Yes," he smiled and smoothed the folds of his cloak with a pleased vanity, "yes, I am to be a character in a romance."

I smiled. Athman turned his dark eyes on me with gentle commiseration. "Have you ever been a character in a romance, Sidi ?"

"Never."

"Ah, then you do not know what a warm feeling that gives you inside. To have people reading about you, and perhaps saying : '*Tiens !* this

Athman, I would like to know him.' That gives me much pleasure."

He drew a deep breath of satisfaction, then continued: "In his romance I am not called Athman, nor even by my second name—Alouï; but it is I—an Arab poet. Oh, there is no mistake! One day you will read this romance, Sidi, and you will say to yourself: 'Yes, this is Athman!' then all will return to your memory: this journey, and that beautiful whiteness which you thought a lake, and the great desert, *là bas*."

In the silence that ensued Abdullah's voice could be heard grunting and groaning as he adjusted the pack of the baggage-camel. His complaints were accompanied by the hoarse, menacing snarl of the animal as, turning an indignant head in his direction, she showed her teeth in a fit of dreary passion. My thoughts still dwelt on Athman's words.

"What part do you take in the romance?" I questioned.

Athman's face assumed a thoughtful expression.

"He did not tell me that, Sidi, but I expect I am the hero. You see, I was with him all the time."

"The hero," I said, with a smile. "Poor fellow! then your fate is sealed."

"Ah!" His anxiety was visible.

"He will be sure to marry you off before the end of the book."

Athman laughed gaily.

"Is that all, Sidi? That will suit me very well. I would like to be married."

"But that is not all. You will have a family of at least a dozen children."

"Children?" his voice softened, a half-smile parted his lips.

"You appear to like children?"

"To like them!" he stared at me with a surprise that was all but a reproach. "I love them, Sidi." Then, as though he had forgotten my presence, as though his words were the outcome of an imperative need of expression, he cried impulsively: "Ah! *Mon Dieu!* to love with one's whole heart, to have children, to make them happy—it is everything in life."

CHAPTER XX.

WE CONVERSE BY THE WAY.

SLOWLY we began the descent towards the Chott. In a short space of time we reached the level of the seeming lake and wended our way along its margin. The sand at this point was firm and hard as though it had lately been washed by a tide. It was but a narrow strip extending southwards, curving to meet the indentation of the bays.

Upon our immediate right were dunes of sand, not hard and regular like the desert-waves to which we had become accustomed, but piled in mounds of fantastic form, ribbed and scarified by the action of the wind. From my camel's back I could see far off, where, receding into the shimmering distance, hills and hills, and yet again hills, of loose yellow sand sweltered beneath the blue of the sky.

This was the desert as I had pictured it—the desert as it had appealed to its lovers ever since time was, ever since God had blessed it with beauty and cursed it with sterility. I had come to it at last—at last, after so many years, after so many leagues, after so many dreams. Imperiously it beckoned to me. I longed to become one with it ;

to climb these treacherous slopes and plunge down these steep inclines ; to be conscious of the " give " of crumbling sand beneath my feet ; to take it in both hands and feel the myriads of golden grains trickling like water between my fingers.

The desert ! It was at once a beauty and a mystery, a desolation and a terror. The sunlight licked its golden face with tongues of fire ; it radiated flame, from lustreless yellow to tawny orange, yet beneath the unstable summits, the valleys slept in shadow, blue as lapis lazuli. It awoke wonder, it silenced speech, it beat down thought. Even so does the Sphinx lift her glorious face to the sun, a marvel beyond the reach of language.

Yet there was something vaguely terrifying in its appearance. The day was calm, and yet, despite the wide and universal peacefulness, it gave signs of disquietude ; signs, too, of the savage strength that lurked behind its mask of smiles. A puff of hot air got up to dance and the eye traced its passage, a tiny spiral whirling ceaselessly like wind-blown smoke from sandhill to sandhill. Another and yet another followed till the whole scene was amove. There was a sinister suggestiveness in this airy dance. It was as though a drowsy tiger should thrust out a paw and languidly display his claws.

The sentiment of the scene was one of inexpressible melancholy. Desolation brooded alike over lifeless sea and tenantless sands. As we paced slowly onwards I caught sight of the skeleton of a

camel half embedded at our feet. The bones, bleached to an ivory white, showed meagre as the ribs of a long-forgotten wreck. It was but one among many such skeletons which we had passed upon our journey; yet, lying where it did, it struck the traveller with painful significance. It was as though death were indeed present, and had made this spot peculiarly his own.

"The Sidi thinks it beautiful?" questioned Athman.

"Beautiful, yes, but sad."

"That is true," he assented cheerfully. "Sad things are often beautiful. As for me, I adore sadness. By-the-way, I know a story that will please you. It is extremely sad. Its name is, 'The History of the Two Goblets.' The Arabs like it very much. Shall I tell it now?"

"Not now, Athman. To-night, perhaps; when the moon shines."

"*C'est bon!*" he nodded a smiling assent. "The moon will give it much horror. The Sidi is full of ideas. He is worthy to be an Arab—yes, and even a poet."

We rode on in silence. My eyes wandered to the sand-dunes. A desert rat ran along a knife-like edge. At every touch of the timorous little feet the fine sand trickled downwards in thin streams.

We began to cross an arm of the white lake that stretched to the foot of the sand-dunes. The wonder of its existence but became more wonderful on a nearer acquaintance. The sand was thickly covered with powdery crystals, glittering, snow-white. In-

deed, so closely did they resemble the purity and freshness of newly-fallen snow, that I could with difficulty realise that we were in sun-ridden Africa. As the camels passed sedately over this spotless carpet, the ear became alive to a succession of little crisp sounds that recalled the crunch of frost beneath the feet. Afar in the distance silvery islands and pearly headlands came and went like changes in a dream.

“Ho!” exclaimed Abdullah. His voice always grated on me, it hovered between a scream and a growl. “Ho! son of Salah, canst thou not yet see Ourir? Methinks it should now be in sight.”

Athman, raising himself in the saddle and shading his eyes from the fierce sunlight, gazed long ahead.

“I see it,” he cried with excitement. “Ah! the beautiful oasis.”

My unpractised eyes, however, could distinguish nothing save a glare of distant heat.

“There, Sidi, before us. Do you not see the little green line that whispers of rest and shade—cool even as the waters of the Oued Biskra?”

I followed his extended finger to where the margin of the Chott mixed and mingled with the desert. A tremble of green, a mere point, caught my eye. So distant was it, so enveloped in quivering layers of atmosphere, that I came near to doubting its existence.

“Yes,” continued Athman in tones of deep admiration, “a beautiful oasis is that of Ourir. You have seen none like it yet, Sidi. It is not made in little gardens like those of the Arabs; no, but in

long straight lines. Twenty-five thousand palms, think of that ! and each tree is watered twice a week from artesian wells ; one of my uncles told me all about it ; he worked there at the date harvest. It is wonderful."

"What is that you say ?" shouted Abdullah. He was walking by the side of Athman's camel, clinging with one hand to the rope that bound the pack-saddle to the animal's body ; his sandals crunched on the white soil.

Athman repeated his remark in Arabic. Abdullah nodded approval.

"He speaks truth," he corroborated, gesticulating with the camel goad. "Yes, it is the most beautiful. It brings in much money. Wah ! what is like unto money for usefulness ? Ho ! for the good white silver pieces ; how they sparkle in the hand !"

He paused for a moment to curse the baggage-camel, who had lagged behind, then catching us up he continued in the same guttural, yet ear-piercing tones : "It is old, Sidi, this oasis ; how old I know not, but older, I believe, than my father's oldest camel, and she lived to a great age. I have none so old. She came from far south, even from the country of the Touaregs—a dangerous tribe are the Touaregs. I have heard my father tell of her often. As I say, she was very old. He, too, grew to a great age. He was smaller than me, but strong as a lusty palm-tree ; yes, it was not possible to tire him. That is before he injured his leg by a fall ; you see, the sand got into the wound

and it never healed properly. I also had a sore once, above the knee, from a kick ; but, praise be to Allah ! a medicine man gave me a written charm for it which I wear always round my neck. It cost me two rebeias. But all this is nothing to the great age of that camel, who would, I believe, be alive now but for a staggering sickness that seized her suddenly during a journey between Ouargla and—why dost thou laugh, O son of Salah ? ”

The question was abrupt, the tone suspicious, the manner full of resentment. Athman was indeed shaking with merriment.

“ By the beard of the Prophet ! ” he chuckled, “ we will all be as old as thy father’s camel before thou hast finished.”

For a moment no one spoke. The upturned eyes of Abdullah were as two live coals in a black grate. Then of a sudden his anger broke loose. I watched the two men with apprehension. Athman, however, listened to him with so good-natured a smile that the resentment of the Arab melted like an icicle in the sunlight.

“ Allah ! ” he growled, and his voice betrayed a comical mixture of thwarted rage and dawning good humour. “ One cannot be angry with thee. No ; thou art a very child. Thy smile loosens the heart-strings. But, tell the Sidi of the oasis thyself. It is thy affair. Thou art a driver of words, I of camels. Allah be praised ! I am no poet to pack a dozen loads on one saddle.”

“ There is naught to tell,” said Athman, “ save that the oasis was planted by the wealthy company

of South Algeria, and that we camp there to-night, if Allah wills."

"Yes, yes," screamed Abdullah, "and we will go to the village. Does not my good friend Bou-Dik live there? And is there not the tomb of a Marabout under the palm-trees, even by the gates of the Overseer's house? We will say a prayer; who knows but it may ward off evil. But, O son of Salah," he rubbed his thin beard reflectively with the butt-end of the camel-goad, "what may be the name of the Sidi Overseer? It has run from my memory, even as water from a leaky goat-skin."

"The Sidi Palatin," replied Athman.

"By the tomb of Sidi Mammar," growled the Arab, "these infidel names are as sand in a believer's throat." He spat hastily, then continued: "Yet is there some good even in Nazarenes. This same Overseer, whose cursed name mocks my tongue, hath a bottle of cloudy fire-water. Many moons ago he gave some to me. By Allah, never will I forget it. May the tents of my tribe be burned if it did not seek diligently for the remote corners of my stomach; aye, and fill them all with the fullness of delight. Ouah! Ouah!"

He grunted loudly and rubbed a portion of his lean anatomy with gusto. With his beak-like nose and grey burnous he resembled a vulture gloating over the memory of some bygone gorge. From his lofty seat Athman looked down on him with grave disapproval. Then, catching my eye, he said in French:

"He means absinthe, Sidi. Such things are a curse to the Arabs."

"Do you never drink, Athman?"

"No," he replied shortly.

My curiosity aroused, I questioned him on the subject, but for long he would not reply. From his expression I could see that he doubted me. We might be on friendly terms, but there was no getting over the fact that I was an infidel. Little by little, however, my gravity reassured him.

"Sidi," he said at length, "to drink and to smoke are forbidden. In the past I have done these things, not once, but many times. But this year I have vowed a vow never to do them again. Allah helping me, I will keep it."

CHAPTER XXI.

BY THE CAMP-FIRE.

I WAS retracing my steps towards our camp after a visit to Ourir. I was alone ; Abdullah I had left behind me, seated at the village well, surrounded by his friends ; Athman awaited my return on the fringe of the oasis, where desert faced the Chott, having volunteered to pitch my tent and prepare my evening meal.

Night was at hand ; already deep shadows lurked beneath the branches, and even in the open spaces between the trees, the ground showed dim and indistinct.

The oasis of Ourir disappointed me. I by no means shared the admiration of my companions for its long and symmetrical lines. I missed the many little gardens, the wayward and intricate paths, the babble of running water, the delightful diversity of ages whereby the elder trees appeared to watch over and protect the younger growths, and the various greens where fig and apricot mingled the brightness of their leaves with the more sombre foliage of the palms.

Yet the oasis, artificial though it was, was not without beauty. There was a subdued solemnity

in these orderly companies that spoke to the imagination. They were all so silent, so stately, so motionless, drawn up rank and file, line behind line, fronting the desert and the stars. Down the ghostly avenue that glimmered grey in the twilight I walked almost on tip-toe, fearful lest by any sudden noise—the breaking of a branch or the rolling of a stone—I might alarm this silent amuscade of palms. Not a sound broke the stillness. Not a leaf rustled. It seemed to me that in the darkness I could almost hear them holding their breath as they waited and watched for the night-summons that never came. The smell of damp earth and lusty green growths met the nostrils. Above, the stars pulsed, far away, in a pathway of blue between lines of foliage.

At length I reached the end of the avenue and turned my eyes towards the Chott. The flicker of a fire caught my attention. Towards it I made my way. By its light I could see my tent pitched on an eminence overlooking the lake. Beside the flames sat Athman. He was writing.

The sight of our little encampment, its promise of rest and shelter, the cheerful glow of its fire, the presence of Athman—all warmed my heart. They spelt home and welcome, none the less dear to me for being but the humble dwelling of a Bedouin—here one night, there the next, wandering ever, subject to no dictates but those of a roving fancy.

“Athman!” I called.

“One moment, Sidi.” He raised a warning hand and bent anew over his work. The firelight

flickered on his eager face, his woolly hair, his red fez ; it danced on the silver of his ring till the blue stone flashed like a feverish eye.

I looked around. No sign of supper was to be seen. I was hungry.

"Athman!" I cried impatiently. "Where is my supper?"

"I have it," he shouted, scribbling with all his might. "That is a good idea. If a maiden loved passionately and was thwarted by her parents, without doubt she would say: 'Love is the all-important. Where my beloved is there is happiness, but——'"

I shook him in desperation.

"Sidi, Sidi; how can I write if you shake me like that?"

I repeated my question.

"Supper, Sidi?" He gazed around with a bewildered eye. Then in sudden self-reproach: "*Mon Dieu!* I am sorry. I had quite forgotten it."

We made a cold and comfortless meal. Athman regaled himself on his favourite sardines. Between generous mouthfuls he recited to me his latest composition. The moon was long in rising. At last a glimmer as of dawn in some ethereal sphere blanched the sky. Seated by the camp fire, which by this time had sunk to a handful of red embers, we watched the dusk awake into silver. No one spoke. Athman sat with his knees drawn up to his chin; by his expression I could see that his soul was steeped in the beauty of the hour. I lay on my face in the warm sand—my feet to the fire.

The effect of moonlight on the Chott was one of sad and yet unearthly splendour. The desolate spaces trembled into animation. There was a quiver of wan light, a flutter of dying radiance, and again the purity of its lustre reminded me of snow.

In the distance the silver melted into blue. To our left the desert swooned beneath the moon ; so pale and sad did it look that it had the appearance of a corpse strewn with white flowers. Behind us the palms massed themselves, black and silent as a company of mourners.

"Athman," I whispered, "now is the time for your story."

He roused himself with an effort.

"It is as the Sidi wishes," he murmured ; then in a low voice, and falling naturally into Arabic, he began the following tale :

THE HISTORY OF THE TWO GOBLETS.

Daikelgene was one of the most famous Arab poets of antiquity. But though he commanded language, yet was he unable to command his passions. Love and wine enslaved his senses. Now, Daikelgene possessed two slaves to whom he was deeply attached—the one a young and graceful girl, the other a tender and beautiful boy. The latter was his cupbearer ; the former ministered unto his affections. When he caroused he placed the girl on his right hand, the boy on his left. They were his joy and his delight. He loved them with a passion that knew no bounds.

But one day the poet's mind was taken possession

of by his evil genius. The thought that death might part him from his favourites filled him with horror. It darkened his days as the shadow of a pursuing eagle darkens the flight of a young gazelle. The fear lest they might one day belong to another tortured him without end. Jealousy sat within his soul. He decided to kill them. Without loss of time he put his fatal resolution into effect. When he beheld them dead and stretched at his feet his mind was racked with a new fear. Death, thought he, will now possess them ; their beautiful bodies will belong to him alone, and no remembrance of their loveliness will be left to me. Let me therefore mingle their blood with dust and fashion therefrom two goblets, that though dead they may still continue to minister unto my pleasures. As he said, so he did. Placing the goblet of the girl upon his right hand, and that of the boy upon his left, he filled them to the brim with wine. Weeping he embraced the goblet upon his right, reciting the while the following verses :

“ Oh, star who swims into my ken,
Sorrow has crowned thee with immortality.
Still can I drain pleasure in rosy draughts from thy lips.
Oh, maid of my delight,
By thy little feet I swear ;
By every flower they have pressed in the paths of life,
That I adore thee beyond hopes of Paradise.
It was not to translate thee to the skies
That I gave thee the fatal blow,
It was because of my great and haunting fear
That perchance, one day, another might make thee unhappy,
And might even rejoice in thy unhappiness.”

Then, turning to the goblet on his left, it also he

embraced tenderly. Weeping, and with many sighs, he addressed unto it the following lines :

“ I feared, oh, Adolescent, that Time would betray me,
I killed thee with my hand,
And yet I loved thee with my heart.
My body still walks the earth,
But my heart has followed thee into the skies.
Thou resemblest the full moon in her glory.
I sought to keep thee on earth,
But the darkened heaven reproached me.
I have seen thee die, as if sleep kissed thee.
Sorrow, bending above thee, wept hot tears on thy face.
Ah, God ! if Death could but see
How much the living suffer when he passes,
He would himself weep in the dark and cavernous tomb.”

CHAPTER XXII.

THE OVERSEER.

SHORTLY after sunrise we were again ready to take the road. The Chott was now all aglitter in the morning light. The little space of ground too, which fate had for a few hours permitted me to call my own, was the recipient of a more than regretful glance. The blackened embers of our fire and the trampled sand alone bore witness to our occupation. For some time I lingered, striving to impress the scene more indelibly on my memory; but time pressed, Athman called to me, and giving free rein to my camel I hastened after my companions.

Our road lay through the oasis of Ourir. As we approached the village we encountered a man mounted on an Arab barb. Observing me to be a European he at once reined in his horse, and introduced himself as Monsieur Palatin, the overseer of the plantation. He was tall, thin, with a pale face, and deep sunken eyes of a light grey colour. He looked extremely ill, so ill that I observed him to sway in his saddle as though he could with difficulty keep his seat. His costume consisted of a white

duck suit, long riding boots reaching to the knee, and a sun helmet. Upon his invitation I dismounted, and followed him to his house.

It was a wooden dwelling of two storeys, the upper of which was gained by an outside staircase. It was picturesquely situated. Immediately in front was a small open square, in which were a mosque, the tomb of a Marabout, and a well. To the left, clustered the brown and flat-roofed houses of the village. Ringing it round were palms innumerable ; not however an unbroken circle, for every here and there the leafy barrier was pierced by an avenue, and the eye travelled outwards along far vistas of slender stems and pendant foliage. The sunlight was everywhere. It rioted in every open space and revenged itself upon the forest shadows by flinging showers of gold through intervening foliage. The little square was like a goblet of sunlight with an emerald rim. A girl stood beside the well, a pitcher on her shoulder ; a naked child clung to her dress ; their shadows were splashes of indigo upon the ground. To the right our camels formed a patient group. In the centre the dome of the Marabout's tomb sparkled in a manner so intolerable that the dazzled eyes sought the shadow of the palms with relief.

The Overseer and I ascended the staircase to the upper room, Athman and Abdullah remaining in the courtyard.

"You have all the refinements of life," I exclaimed. "Books, pictures, even a parrot !"

"It is necessary," he answered. "One is quite

alone here. For months and months one does not see a white face ; it is necessary to have such companions."

While speaking he supported himself on the back of a chair. Now that he had taken off his helmet he had the appearance of a man between forty and fifty years of age. His hair was thin, of a brown colour, turning to grey at the temples.

"Will not monsieur give himself the trouble to be seated ?" He emphasized his remark with a slight bow and motion of the hand.

A rough palm-wood table stood near the door ; a three-legged stool, a bench, and an armchair in dilapidated condition, were grouped around it. At the earnest entreaties of my host I seated myself in the armchair, while he took possession of the stool.

"Clink ! clink !" A noise as of glass struck by a stone rang through the room.

"*C'est Jean Jacques*, my parrot," said the Overseer.

"*Ma foi !*" cried the bird, with an inimitable chuckle. "*Que nous sommes gai !*"

"I taught him to say that," continued his master proudly. "He is clever ; he speaks well. Monsieur thinks as I do ?"

Pleased with the heartiness of my assent he cast a look of admiration at the bird, who, from between the bars of his cage, returned the attention with a stare of bright and bead-like fixity.

"It is lonely here ; we are so far away from the world." He spoke softly, his eyes still resting on

the parrot. "It is stupid of me ; I feel sad at times, but when Jean Jacques tells me how gay we are, *Mon Dieu !* I almost believe him."

He sighed, and half turning round gazed outwards into the sunshine. His eyes were full of melancholy. His hand resting on the table was thin almost to transparency.

"*Tiens !*" he cried, rousing himself with a sudden gesticulation ; "I have lately had fever, and for many weeks I lay there"—he nodded towards an inner room—"like a log, unable to move. Ah, monsieur !" he turned upon me, "one knows not what it is to be alone till one is ill ; to see no white face ; to hear never the dear French ; to lie, weak as water, with the black fear at one's heart that all is finished, that soon one will be stamped out of sight in the mud beneath the palms."

He paused, sighed, then continued more quietly : "I know not what I would have done without Jean Jacques. Monsieur, I assure you that that bird there, he has a heart ; yes, a heart of gold. He understood the situation. You ask what he did ? *Mon Dieu !* I will tell you. He climbed with the greatest difficulty on to my bed. It is steep ; he fell away many times, but he did not allow himself to be discouraged. There would he sit all day to keep me company. Yes, and every time I groaned, he would cry : '*Ha ! que nous sommes gai,*' simply, do you see, monsieur, to give me courage ; to make me understand that he, Jean Jacques, was there, near at hand, ready to console me. Ah, never will I forget that ; no, never !"

The parrot, his head on one side, was listening intently.

"You remember ; *petit vaut rien ?*" said his master.

"Clink ! clink !" replied the bird.

The Overseer opened the cage door and stroked the grey head with a loving forefinger. Jean Jacques submitted to the caress with dignity.

"But, monsieur," cried the Overseer in sudden self-reproach, "you are hot and doubtless thirsty. I forget all. You must pardon me. What will you drink ? I have coffee, absinthe, and *sirop de fraises*."

I chose the latter, and soon we were pledging each other in the rosy liquid.

"You wonder what I do ?" His face brightened at a reference to his work. "*Ma foi !* there is much to be done. We are not idle here. Every day there are palms to water and soil to till. The dates, too, demand much attention : sifting, and packing, and sending to the coast—the best in little cases ; the more ordinary in the large sacks that you have seen suspended from camels' backs. Ah, no ; we are not idle !"

I questioned him about the Arabs. He shrugged his shoulders.

"*Mon Dieu !* there are all sorts. I have twenty families down there in my village." He pointed with his cigarette at the open window. "Some I like—they are naïve as children—but others are worthless fellows, thieves whom it is necessary to beat."

His face darkened. He cast a furtive glance at

the door, drew his stool nearer to me, and bending forward said in a low voice :

“ When I was ill they—but, no ! of what use to tell you ? You would not believe it. You see this place bright and joyous with sunshine ; how then can you understand what it is in the dark, when one lies here weak, helpless, and alone with people whom one cannot trust.”

He broke off with an abrupt gesture and sank into a sombre train of thought. I did not interrupt him. His eyebrows met above his deep-set eyes ; his mouth twitched under the influence of strong emotion. A laugh rang in from the sunlit world. The Overseer started. An ironical smile came into his face and he too laughed, but bitterly and without merriment.

“ Listen ! ” he cried. “ How happy they are ! ”

The laugh died away. A bird called from somewhere in the sunlight, another answered it. A silken rustle whispered from the palms. It was peaceful beyond words. The Overseer reached across me and poured out a glass of absinthe. His hand trembled, bottle and glass tinkled together. He raised it to his lips and drained the contents at a gulp.

We sat silent. Jean Jacques, coming out of the cage, began a laborious ascent, by aid of beak and claws, to his master's shoulder. Arrived at his destination, he gave vent to a victorious chuckle, which, however, he instantly suppressed, and fell to watching me with disconcerting fixity.

The conversation drifted to my trip. In a few

words I satisfied his curiosity. He nodded his approval.

"You do well to come," he said. "It is worth the trouble. Few travellers journey so far south. The desert frightens them. They see nothing of the Oued Rir with its beautiful oases. *Ma foi!* I was much surprised to see you to-day; but I was glad; yes, this will be a day to remember." He blew a stream of smoke into the air, flicked his cigarette ash with the nail of his little finger, and continued with an apologetic smile: "After all, life here has its consolations. You have seen my palms; are not they beautiful? To see them now is well, but to see them in the autumn, at the time of the date harvest, is—is superb!" He waved his arms, his voice rang with enthusiasm. "*Oui, Monsieur,*" he said proudly, "there are twenty thousand of them. They are my children. Eh, what do you say? A large family? It is true. Ho! ho! ho!"

He laughed as gaily as a boy. The parrot clinked his sympathy.

From the courtyard came the sound of voices; among them I recognised that of Athman; its gay bright tones were distinctly audible. He appeared to be telling a story, for the other voices were but raised occasionally in approving comment. I rose to take my leave.

The Overseer endeavoured to dissuade me, but finding me firm, he accompanied me to the square, the parrot still on his shoulder.

Before bidding me farewell he drew my atten-

tion to a little company of palms grouped around the well. They were exceptionally tall and beautiful trees. His pride in them shone transparent.

"Look!" he cried, opening both arms as though he wished to embrace them. "What pictures they are! Nowhere will you find better palms. See! that one is a male, he is only good for fertilising; but all the others are females and give two sacks quite full of dates each. Eh? What say you? Isn't that good? Two sacks of the first quality. That is to say, fifty francs per tree. Ha!" He rubbed his hands with satisfaction. Then with sudden and characteristic change he became serious, and laying a hand on my arm said slowly and impressively:

"Monsieur, I will tell you the secret: it is much water and much sun. Yes, and I think also much love. The Arabs say: 'The feet in running water and the head in the burning heavens.' That is the secret. Only look at them! So tall, so straight, so green; not a dead branch. They have the happy air, haven't they? One would say they were gay."

"*Gai! Gai!*" cried Jean Jacques, catching at the word with a chuckle. "Clink! clink! clink! Ha! *que nous sommes gai!*"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN UNEXPECTED STORM.

THE afternoon was overcast. Before we reached the oasis of Maghier, our destination for the night, a bank of clouds rising from the north had effectually blotted out the sunshine. At first the novelty of this grey canopy pleased the eyes. It was more restful than the luminous vault that had for so long stretched above us. But any sensations of relief were more than counterbalanced by the depression that fell from the drifting sadness overhead.

The great spaces over which we passed were so essentially the home of sunlight, that to see them thus was to be conscious only of their desolation. It was to forget their beauty. It was as if one wandered through familiar rooms, seeking a face, but finding only silence and abandonment. I doubt if this aspect of the desert would have struck me thus forcibly had I not become conscious of a growing indisposition. My head ached violently and my body burned with fever. It was but a touch of the sun, still it was powerful enough to colour

surrounding nature for me with the sombre tints of my own feelings.

Never before had I seen the desert in a more sinister light. It lay before, behind, and around us, a great lifeless thing, without colour, without form—a nothingness, abandoned of man, forsaken of God. Its lines blurred as they receded into shades of dull, leaden grey. Afar off, the sight knew not where, they mingled with the inexpressible desolation of the sky. This leaden pall stretched everywhere. Here and there it darkened into patches of formless obscurity, as the desert rose and fell. These patches had the appearance of phantoms lurking in the night. In the west there was a slight lifting of this darkness, where the sun, on the point of sinking, struggled with the clouds. The silence was intense, unbroken, except for the light wind that, blowing from the north-west, moaned over the darkened plains. Its voice was both soft and sad.

The camels, with long outstretched necks, stalked noiselessly forwards. Abdullah was, as usual, in the rear. His voice, raised at intervals, could be heard encouraging the baggage-camel.

The wind grew momentarily colder. I drew my burnous round me with a shiver. My head felt as though it belonged to another person. I marvelled at its weight.

“It is going to rain,” said Athman in a low voice. He wheeled in his saddle and peered into the quarter of the wind. Then, turning to me, he continued: “Happily we are quite near to Maghier. See; there it is.”

He pointed ahead. A dark line appeared to have sprung magically from the ground. A solitary light twinkled at one of its extremities.

"Let us make haste," I said.

We urged our camels to greater speed. Athman spoke again.

"Where does the Sidi wish to pass the night? There is a Bordj kept by a Frenchman, but it is very dear. And then—an hotel! That does not go with Arab life. And we—we are Bedouins! Ho! ho!" he chuckled softly.

"Go where you like," I said wearily, "only, let us get there soon."

He looked at me as if in surprise. Then, assuming a gentle tone said:

"Sidi, here is my plan. We will pitch the tent in the open space beyond the great Mosque; there is a well quite near, very convenient for us. And then, too, the palms will shelter us from this wind. A little moment and we are there. Hola! *allez toujours!*" and he dug his heels into his camel's flanks.

We reached the oasis, followed a winding path hedged in by mud walls and overhung by palm branches, and found ourselves in an open space. Before us lay the town; on one side loomed the Mosque; behind, the palm-trees massed themselves darkly in serried ranks. If possible, this scene was marked by a desolation even more poignant than that of the desert. Like all Arab towns, Maghier appears to the traveller but as a heap of ruins. The eye roams from crumbling walls to

dilapidated domes. On all sides is the stamp of decay, neglect, abandonment. Tufts of grass, and even bushes, sprout from the ruined dwellings. Gaps in the architecture yawn in sinister blackness. The flat roofs give the impression of having suffered a bombardment—not recently, but at some distant period. The streets are mere lanes, striving to hide themselves in subterranean shadow.

As I gazed, the Mosque alone seemed intact, solidly lifting its bell-like dome into the gloom of the sky. From the oasis came a continuous and plaintive noise, the churning of a myriad branches.

As our little caravan came to a halt, several figures emerged from the shadow of the Mosque. They stood watching us from a distance, neither speaking nor moving; at length one of their number, a child, raised a shrill cry and fled towards the town.

My companions were long in unlading the camel and erecting the tent. The arguments, cries, ejaculations seemed interminable. Abdullah's voice, guttural yet querulous, never ceased to make itself heard. Before they had finished the task, rain began to fall; at first in large isolated drops, then more heavily. Overhead the palms sighed and sobbed under the scourge of the wind.

At length the little shelter stood ready. Thankfully I threw myself on the camp bed. The night, the wind, the rain—even our journey, seemed unreal, and as though they were but changes in an evil dream.

"What will you eat, Sidi?" I opened my eyes. Athman stood at my side. It seemed years since I had lain down. I could with difficulty recall my surroundings. The tent was full of smoke; Athman had lighted a fire within its shelter, on account of the rain that now was falling heavily. Through this haze his figure loomed like a phantom.

"Nothing," I replied.

"How! Nothing?" he rejoined in good-natured remonstrance.

"I have no appetite. I only wish to sleep. See to your own supper, like a good fellow."

"The Sidi is, perhaps, not well?" he asked anxiously.

"A touch of the sun. It is nothing. I am lazy, and shall be all right to-morrow."

He laid a hand on mine, and gave vent to a cry of alarm.

"*Mon Dieu!* how hot you are! You have fever—are suffering perhaps—and I—beast that I am! I think only of eating! *Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!* What shall I do?" His voice rang with a solicitude that was very genuine. Still talking, he vanished into the smoke, reappearing on the instant with his burnous, in which, despite my remonstrances, he insisted in enveloping me. Then having, under my directions, given me a dose of quinine, he seated himself by the fire.

The smoke cleared gradually. The flames burned with fitful light, Athman having lowered the flap of the tent to protect them from the storm.

The uproar without had increased. The tent

rocked to the gusts. My one fear was lest we should be blown bodily into the night. I lay and listened to the blasts, now far, now near, but ever audible ; for even when a lull made itself felt, I could hear them dismally sweeping in the distance. Cold breaths, entering by unprotected spaces, passed shudderingly between us, stirring our clothing and raising the hair upon our heads. The air was full of sand. It penetrated everywhere. To close the teeth was to be conscious of it in one's mouth. The noise of rain and wind mingling with the wild commotion of branches sounded fearsome in the night.

I watched Athman making coffee. He seemed unmoved by the clamour. Every now and then he fed the flames with broken twigs. The light glowed on the copper pots, and winked from the blue stone in his ring. Once he rose and, stealing to my side, bent over me. I feigned sleep. For a time he watched me ; then, satisfied with his inspection, he reseated himself by the fire. His quiet companionship was a consolation. I could not consider myself sufficiently fortunate in the knowledge that he was there—near me—a sympathetic presence, ready, nay willing, to do any little thing that I desired.

Again the tent shook. The goat-skins thundered with continuous clapping ; but again the rain, descending in solid sheets, drowned all other sounds.

During a lull in the storm a voice made itself heard, startling us both with unexpected vociferation.

"Open ! open !" it screamed.

Athman, leaping to his feet, unfastened the door-flap, and a man sprang within. It was Abdullah. He streamed with rain ; his face shone in wet lights ; his ragged burnous shot waterspouts to the floor.

"Allah !" he cried. "What a night !"

Athman silenced him with raised hands, and for a moment they stood motionless, their eyes fixed on me. Then Abdullah spoke. Athman listened to him with the liveliest interest. Their voices, pitched low, were drowned by the roar of the storm. The Arab appeared to be endeavouring to persuade Athman to accompany him, for his gestures pointed towards the town, and he repeatedly touched him on the chest. In his excitement he raised his voice, and I heard the words, "Marriage," "feast," and "poet." Athman's face expressed longing, but he shook his head, with a backward gesture, to where I lay. I began to understand.

"Athman !" I called. I had to repeat it twice before he heard. They both started. Athman crossed at once to my side. Abdullah, too, came a step nearer.

"Athman, he wishes you to go to a marriage-feast ; perhaps, also, to recite your poetry ?"

"Yes, Sidi ; it is just that. But——"

"You must go."

"And leave you here ! ill ! alone ! *Ah, non ; par exemple ! jamais de la vie !*" His voice and gestures shook with indignation. I caught him by the hem of his jacket.

"Listen to me," I said earnestly. "All I wish is to go to sleep. You can do nothing for me. Indeed, it is better for me to be alone. Hear me, you stupid fellow—don't shake your head—I want you to go."

He cast a look at me that was half-pathetic, half-puzzled, but wholly affectionate. Then, reaching out his hand and readjusting the burnous which had fallen from me, said :

"No, Sidi, I stay here."

In his voice was the firmness which one might use to a sick child. I repressed a cry of impatience.

Abdullah, who had been gazing first at one then at the other, with questioning eyes, now spoke :

"It is a great feast," he cried eagerly. "There is much to eat and drink. There is music ; aye, and there are dancing-girls ! A feast so great is a gift from Allah ; it cometh seldom and must not be missed."

Before he had made an end of speaking, the coffee boiled over, and Athman ran to the fire. I signed to Abdullah. He came nearer.

"Make him go." I whispered. He was but a black object between me and the fire, yet I saw him shrug his shoulders.

"Sidi," he muttered hoarsely, with a glance to where Athman crouched by the flames. "Words avail nothing. He can be a very mule for obstinacy. I know him. What he sayeth, that will he do. Ah !" He gave a deep grunt of impatience. "It is pure madness. Money, good silver pieces, are to be had by such as he ; yes, and much

honour. And then—the feast ! Ka ! I have seen. The guests are as flies in summer ; and the cous-cous, by Allah ! it is piled on platters of wood ; it is high, even as the knee of a man. Wah ! ”

“ He must go,” I insisted. Then after a moment’s thought, “ I will make him go.”

He gave a gesture of incredulity. Coming still nearer, he breathed upon me ; the odour of camel was overpowering.

“ Sidi, where the heart is—thou knowest the saying. Yet, it amazeth me. To like a Nazarene so much ! it is not natural ; an infidel ! an unbeliever ! Allah ! ” He muttered low, combing his beard with his fingers. I could feel that his fierce eyes were fixed upon me. His manner was not as though he meant to insult, but merely as though his dull brain were groping for a reason which might satisfactorily account for his comrade’s eccentricity. Then, as I lay watching him, he half turned towards the fire ; his face softened, and a kindly light came into his eyes.

“ Methinks I understand,” he said slowly ; “ many moons ago I, too, refused a feast ; one of my camels lay grievously ill, and——” he broke off suddenly ; Athman was listening.

“ Athman,” I cried, “ give me my boots.”

Had I requested a slice of the moon he could not have betrayed more amazement. His jaw dropped, and for awhile he gazed at me, fear of delirium within his eyes.

“ Your boots, Sidi ? ” he stammered.

“ Yes ; I am going out.”

"*Mon Dieu !* No ! It is not possible !" His hands rose in remonstrance.

"It is not only possible, but certain. I have made up my mind. Abdullah must not go back to this feast alone. To refuse hospitality is to insult. You will not go, so I am obliged to take your place. Where are my boots ? "

I sat up with an effort ; the tent swam before my eyes. I was forced to cling to the goat-skins. Athman's honest face was a battleground of conflicting feelings ; astonishment, indignation, compassion—the latter gained the day. He wrung his hands.

"O Sidi, you are ill ! The storm is at its height ! I cannot let you go."

I lay back on the bed.

"There is but one way out of the difficulty," I said faintly.

"And that ? " He caught at the suggestion with eagerness.

"It will be doing me a kindness."

"Yes ? Yes ? "

"You must go yourself."

His face fell.

"Is—is there no other way, Sidi ? I do not like——"

"None," I said drowsily. "Go quickly, please. I wish to sleep."

He hesitated long, his eyes fixed on me as though he would fain read my thoughts ; then shrugging his shoulders, he spoke rapidly to Abdullah. The Arab listened with open mouth. The arrangement

pleased him. He was all for starting at once, without further loss of time, but to this Athman would by no means consent. There were many things to be done, not one of which would he omit. He replenished the fire, he lighted a candle and placed it within my reach, he made several, and, according to him, "very important" changes in his costume ; then, with many parting injunctions for my comfort, and self-reproaches innumerable, he followed Abdullah into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MORNING AT MAGHIER.

DAY had come. Blessed light again filled the world. I had longed for it during so many hours that its reappearance filled me with the most heart-felt gratitude. The storm of the preceding night had left its traces behind it. The floor of the tent was an inch deep in water. I remembered watching how it had stolen in beneath the goat-skins ; how the fire had splashed it with angry light, and how the embers had hissed out their dying heat at its touch. But the troubles of the night were as nothing now ; my fever had abated, my head no longer throbbed—day had come !

Leaping from bed, I splashed my way to the door, raised the flap, and peered with eager curiosity into the outside world. In a flash the charm of my surroundings laid insistent hands on me. I drew a deep breath and gazed, as though I never could gaze my fill. It was the South—pure and undiluted, free from contamination of things modern ; magical with the magic of the East, the riotous luxuriance of the tropics, the primitive old-world simplicity of Bible-lands.

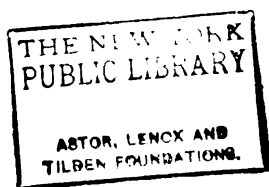
Maghier lay before me, a mysterious city, steeped in the young light, the strangest jumble of Oriental architecture that it is possible to conceive. It was fully as ruined as I had imagined it : the broken walls, the formless gaps, the crumbling parapets, were all there, but they had doffed their air of desolation with the night, and stood confessed, one with the witchcraft of the dawn. The sun-baked mud, of which they were composed, attracted suspicions of colour that trembled in the air. Lilac and rose passed into purple, or warmed into carmine. Silver-grey, that pencilled the more distant dwellings, showed delicately against the wondrous clarity of the sky.

Thus far, all was immersed in wan light. But, as I waited, the Mosque caught at the sun. In an instant, dirty whitewash became molten gold. The dome, uplifted as on hands, shone triumphant. The scene was strangely silent, strangely quiet. I listened—watched—expecting something to happen—I knew not what. A sense of mystery, almost of enchantment, enveloped the town as with an atmosphere. Surely within these dark holes that did duty for doors, within these sinister lanes that led, the eye knew not where, strange things must come to pass. Surely, too, amid such unusual surroundings, men and women could not be quite the same as others whose lives had been passed under more normal conditions. Their characters must of necessity be moulded by their environment ; and what fierce passions would correspond to the sultry heat in that sky ?—what haunting sadness would



Palms encircled the city.

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be engendered by daily association with these ruined homes? The only touch of animation was given by three camels. They formed a group—one lying, two standing—not far distant from a Bedouin tent, between the Mosque and the town.

On every hand palms encircled the city. They extended far—a sea of greenery, an ocean of tropical foliage, a world of lusty growths. Peaceful though they looked, one realised how, within these forest shadows, the battle for existence ceased not, day or night; how the feeble were relentlessly done to death by the strong; how every one of these stately trees had struggled during long years of growth—struggled with silent desperation for adequate root-space, and a share of sunlit sky.

The sound of singing broke on my ears. It came from behind the tent. I peeped round the corner. Beside a well, that formed a pool passing into a stream of running water, stood Athman, engaged in his morning ablutions. His nether man was clad in the customary shawl-like trousers, but from the waist upwards he was naked. The eyes rested on him with pleasure. His magnificent torso shone in black lights, the breadth of his shoulders and the fine modelling of his arms being peculiarly noticeable. He had all the air of an antique, a bronze, cast in the golden days when Greece was a power among the nations. He was singing gaily—some love-song of happy intent, in which the dawn of love was likened to the joy of a newly-awakened day. As he sang, he scrubbed, stooping at times to scoop a handful of water from the pool. I

watched him for some time in silence. He was all unconscious of observation. A bird sang overhead from out the palm branches—Athman sang below ; and it was impossible to say which possessed the merrier voice, or which was more in harmony with the glad spirit of the morning.

The finale came when, his ablutions finished, he caught sight of his reflection in the water. Pleasure and interest overspread his face. Eagerly he bent to admire it ; then, straightening himself, his eyes still fixed on his fascinating double, he began to dance. No longer able to restrain myself, I laughed aloud. The dance came to an untimely end. Athman, after an ejaculation of surprise, joined good-naturedly in the laughter.

" Ah, Sidi, there you are ! " he cried. " And I thought you still asleep ! You are better to-day ? That is good. Yes, I was dancing ; when one feels so gay it is difficult not to sing and dance. And then, it amused me to see that man dancing too." He pointed, chuckling, to his reflection below.

" And the wedding-feast ? " I inquired.

" Ah, *Mon Dieu !* "—he stopped, with raised hands, in the act of putting on his jacket. " It was superb ! Such splendour ! Such fine music ! And everyone was so kind. I fear I was too happy."

His face clouded over.

" Can one be too happy, Athman ? "

" Oh, yes, Sidi, I am sure of it. When men become too happy the Jinn grow jealous. You see, they are capable of doing one an evil turn. My mother told me that."

His voice was very solemn ; reflectively he shook his head.

He pulled on his socks, thrust his feet into his yellow slippers, adjusted his red fez on his curly black hair, and announced himself ready to prepare breakfast.

Some time was occupied in removing the tent to higher ground, and then our fire sent its thin column of smoke into the air. Athman procured some native bread, in the form of cakes, and off this and our customary coffee we made a hearty meal. Abdullah was nowhere to be seen. It became evident that he had feasted not wisely but too well. However, as I had a mind to cultivate a closer acquaintance with Maghier, I willingly dispensed with his services for the day.

The sun circled above the palms. The shadows grew momentarily shorter. The dry and thirsty ground sucked at the pools, which little by little began to disappear. Thus far, the heat was not great, but the radiation of light was extraordinary. The eyes shrank before the fierce splendours of the African sun. Life awoke. From the door of my tent I watched a steady procession of people and animals passing to and fro between the town and the artesian well. Goats, and even camels, sauntered slowly towards the running water, and began to quench their thirst. Women, clad for the most part in draperies of a deep blue colour, passed by on naked feet, bundles of washing piled high upon their steady heads. Girls—some with goat-skin water-bags suspended by thongs from their

shoulders, others with graceful vases of terra-cotta poised upon their hips—chatted and laughed as they awaited their turn beside the well. Children ran everywhere—quaint little people, delighting the ears with their happy voices, and the eyes with their glints of sunlit colour. Many of these juveniles were naked ; their shaven heads and brown bodies shone like polished mahogany in the sun. To see these miniature Arabs bathing in the pool, treating the legs of a camel with familiar indifference, as though they were posts erected for the protection of the young, was to enjoy a sight not soon forgotten.

Before the heat became oppressive, Athman and I strolled forth to visit the town. As we crossed the square, my guide halted before the Mosque. Standing erect, with downcast eyes and hands clasped in an attitude of prayer, he repeated long extracts from the Koran. His voice was low ; the words flowed melodiously from his lips. That he was deeply impressed, not only with the devout character, but also with the absolute importance of his devotions, was very evident. Crossing himself piously, he rejoined me without loss of time.

Before reaching the town we passed a number of women. To one and all Athman murmured a salutation. He addressed each of them as "Lala," with an air of exaggerated respect and studiously averted eyes. Knowing the pleasure which he invariably took in the gentler sex, I ventured to banter him on his aloofness.

"Why don't you look at them ?" I laughed.



A rough palm tree gate.

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Athman was much shocked.

"O Sidi! It would never do. Only think what jealousy that would cause. It is what I have already told you: one must never look at Arab women."

"Not even when they are old and ugly, Athman?"

"Not even when they are old and ugly," he repeated sadly, gazing into the distance.

We penetrated into one of the narrow lanes that did duty for a street. Its breadth did not exceed five feet. It had all the appearance of being hollowed out of mud. The mud walls on either hand terminated in the mud pathway, uneven, dirty, trodden hard by constant use. Passing through a rough palm-tree gate, we entered the inner town. Draped figures of men were to be seen on either hand, some sitting in the shade of the wall, others standing motionless in front of their dwellings.

Within dark and comfortless interiors, I caught sight of the women of the town. All the industry of the place appeared to be in their hands. Despite the nervous remonstrances of Athman, I halted opposite one of the houses. The doorway was low; I was obliged to stoop to peep within. No sunshine could find its way into the dreary room that offered itself to my gaze. The high wall opposite, covered in parts with bitumen, effectually blocked all direct rays of the sun. Only a dim and sorrowful twilight stole in from the lane. The walls were black and smoke-begrimed, although, as a rule, the Arabs only light their fires in the inner courtyard. The ceiling

was still more sombre, lost in obscurity, the home of objectionable insects.

The dwelling contained several families. Two women were seated on the floor, not far from the entrance. They were engaged in grinding corn. The grindstones were placed between them, their work lay in making the upper stone revolve upon the lower by means of two wooden handles. The stones being of considerable weight, it was not only a monotonous, but also an extremely arduous occupation. As my shadow fell on them, they raised their eyes and gazed at me for a moment with a stare which was at once stupefied and void of all interest. An old woman of appalling ugliness was busy tearing coarse hemp with an iron comb. But the principal industry of the house consisted in the working of a large loom which stretched from wall to wall. Behind it were seated some half-a-dozen women. The continual click clack of its movement came to the ears. Many children were present. Some of the little girls—pale, stunted specimens of childhood, that made the heart ache with their prematurely aged faces—were assisting their mothers at the loom. When I became more accustomed to the obscurity, I spied several babies lying in remote corners. They were, for the most part, naked, their faces concealed under handfuls of rags. This, as Athman informed me, is considered necessary as a precaution against flies. The atmosphere was stagnant, sultry, reeking with objectionable odours drawn by the sun from the filthy courtyard beyond. Above the noise of the

loom, the buzzing of myriads of flies was distinctly audible. The air, the floor, the occupants of the room, all were amove with the pests. There was something peculiarly repulsive in the sight, for the fly of the south is an unclean animal, a scavenger, a lively and indefatigable propagator of disease.

These women were, I doubted not, of the poorest class. The long veil of cotton, which begins below the turban and surrounds the face with its ample folds, was worn negligently, and with no attempt to conceal the features. The feet were naked, the arms bare from the shoulders. Both wrists and ankles were ornamented with a profusion of bracelets and anklets fashioned out of horn and carved wood, black as ebony. Their haïks, crossed over the bosom, and fastened around the waist by means of a girdle, fell into natural folds, not without beauty. Originally of a pale purple colour, these haïks had become so faded and stained with the passage of years, that it was with difficulty the eye could trace a suspicion of bygone brightness.

For many minutes I stood watching. After the first interrogatory glance, no one heeded me. All plied their trade without a word, without a movement which showed that they were conscious of observation. Their whole attitude told of lives so fettered to the sordid routine of drudgery that they had ceased long ago to vibrate to other emotions.

Through the inner doorway and above the courtyard wall, I saw a square of sunlit sky. A bird sailed across it on motionless wings. There was

freedom and gladness in the sight. But in this home there was neither happiness nor hope. It was the saddest scene I had yet beheld : the dim light, the hot and stagnant air, the working women. No sound of song or laughter came to the ears, only from out the obscurity, the sullen clicking of the loom, and the ceaseless buzzing of the flies.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE ARAB CAFÉ.

WHEN I rejoined Athman I was treated to a severe reprimand. More in sorrow than in anger he pointed out my shortcomings : how I had offended against all laws of Mohammedan etiquette ; and how his dignity, nay more, his very character as an observer of the laws, was at stake. Nothing but a solemn promise that I would in future be more guarded in my conduct restored his equanimity. Together we penetrated into the labyrinth of lanes.

A dog, catching sight of us from a flat roof a few feet above our heads, burst into the most savage barking. It was a wolf-like creature, yellowish-grey in colour, with pointed snout, erect ears, and small eyes blazing with indescribable ferocity—a typical Arab dog. With bared fangs and dropping jaws it ran hither and thither on the parapet, snapping wildly in our direction, making the air hideous with its outcry. Other dogs from other roofs joined the clamour. I was thankful that a sense of obedience to unseen masters restrained them from attacking us. We should have stood but a poor chance, unarmed, among so many.

The streets were singularly void of life. No children were to be seen. And yet, I mistake ; for as we wandered onwards, a little girl, surprised at some game in the dust, fled from us with sudden cry like a hunted hare. A patter of racing feet—a flutter of coloured rags—and she had vanished into a doorway. As we passed, I peered within, my curiosity excited as to where the timorous little creature had found a shelter. It was a vault, dark and noisome. Within an inner door, I saw her lurking, ready, if necessary, to flee into still remoter depths of shadow. That our presence should excite so lively a fear among the rising generation of Maghier caused us sorrow. Athman was especially eloquent on the subject. Was there, he asked anxiously, anything in his appearance calculated to alarm a child ? For long he puzzled his kindly head over it in vain.

Turning a corner, we came unexpectedly upon an Arab café. The habitués were seated in the lane, their backs propped against the wall. There was an air of repose about them which was inviting.

“If we should join them, Sidi ?” suggested Athman, wiping the perspiration from his face. I assented willingly, whereupon we seated ourselves in two vacant spaces under the wall. But little notice was taken of our arrival. The Arabs responded courteously to Athman’s salutations ; him they accepted, if not with geniality, at all events with indifference. On me, however, their eyes rested with wonder, not untinged with superiority. I was, to them, a Nazarene, an Unbeliever, an un-

accountable work of Allah ; a thing permitted for some inscrutable reason to breathe the same air, and to be warmed by the same sun, but otherwise, as far apart from the sanctity of true Believers as were the goats from the sheep in the parable. With humility I accepted my position, and endeavoured to solace myself with coffee.

Mine host was the only Mohammedan present not influenced by racial prejudices. It may be that his calling and not his will consented to a certain amount of dignified forbearance. For the moment, I represented in his eyes, not a being doomed to eternal punishment, but the welcome equivalent of two small pieces of silver. Be that as it may, he served us willingly, and even condescended to "keep the change."

I cannot leave this excellent old man without paying him the tribute of a few descriptive lines. His name was Djeridi. He wore a turban so immense that it was as if he carried on his poor old head a bundle of dirty linen. His beard was thin and white ; his chin, seen through its scanty covering, resembled a little hillock powdered with snow. Two teeth lurked in his large and cavernous mouth. They showed themselves periodically in professional geniality—like actors forced to fulfil a distasteful engagement. But his eyes ! he might have posed as the lady-killer of Maghier—if indeed there remained any ladies free to be killed in that appreciative town—on the strength of his eyes alone. You looked at them—and forgot all else. They counteracted the unprepossessing appearance of

his turban, aye ! and even of his teeth. They were large and dark. In them was concentrated all the vitality that had ebbed from other portions of his person. As a rule, the eyelids were partially closed, but when, under the influence of excitement, they slowly opened, the wonder of them held you breathless. The pupils dilated. They became two black holes in an antique masque, two mysterious cavities filled with flame ; and, as you watched, the real Djeridi that lurked somewhere in the poor worn-out husk of a body, leaped to life and sprang upon you.

There may have been a dozen Arabs present. They were the fathers, husbands, brothers of the women who were toiling without cessation in the reek of the sunless rooms. Without exception, they lay or sat in a state of listless idleness—idleness so complete and comprehensive that it required to be seen to be realised. The motto of the Arab, by which he lives, moves, and has his being, is : “Seek the shadow and do nothing.” It is his noble privilege as a man.

Noon was at hand. The heat was great. The narrow lane was partly inundated with sunlight. The dividing line between the fierce light and the deep transparent shadow stretched, however, much nearer to the shadow side than to that deluged with flame. It was necessary to sit as close as possible to the café in order to participate in its shelter. The refraction from the opposite wall, distant but a few feet, was like heat-waves from a furnace. Faint noises quivered in the air—the gasping and panting of the breathless world.

An Arab appeared in a doorway. For a moment he stood motionless in the sun—a tall figure dressed in white ; pale, with an air of exhaustion, and eyes blinking in the glare. Then, approaching with slow and dignified step, he joined the little company in the shadow.

No one conversed. Occasionally, it is true, there was a laconic interchange of ideas. Sometimes this would confine itself to gestures—mere suggestions of movement—the questioning lift of a hand, or the languid oscillation of a head. Or again, but this rarely, it would find its way into words.

Thus, after we had been seated some little time, an Arab approached, blocking the lane with his ample form and floating draperies. The faint noise of sandals brushing the soil made itself heard. Recognising an acquaintance, he stopped, exchanged a handshake, raised his fingers ceremoniously to his lips and inquired :

“Thou art well ? ”

“Praise be to Allah ! And thou ? ”

“Very well.”

The guttural voices died away. The new-comer seated himself slowly. Silence again fell on the group.

I looked around me with interest. The man seated on my right was a fit study for a sculptor. His head leaned against the wall ; his eyes were closed ; his long, sinewy throat bare ; his arms outstretched ; his hands open. So motionless was he that one might have fancied him dead, but

for the almost imperceptible movement of his nostrils. Beside him was another study, hunched in a mass, his chin upon his knees, the folds of his draperies falling in classic lines to his feet. A cigarette had dropped from his nerveless fingers ; it lay on the ground, its little smoke rising perpendicularly into the air. Farther off crouched a motionless figure, enveloped from head to foot in a burnous. It looked like a sack flung carelessly on the ground. Upon the other side of Athman sat two men—one with a grey beard, the other, a mere boy, with the down of an incipient moustache upon his upper lip. Both were asleep. The head of the younger rested upon the shoulder of the elder. With relaxed hands they still clasped each other's little fingers.

The somnolent air of the place was an invitation to slumber. Even Djeridi succumbed, for he came no more from out the dark entrance. Athman, too, was all but half asleep. His eyes were closed, his red fez awry, his elbow rested on his knee, his chin on his hand. Only his lips, moving slightly, told of the current of his thoughts. Without doubt he was wandering in the fields of Arab poesie.

There was something delightful in my companions—something almost beautiful, with the beauty of the exquisitely appropriate. Their garments were one with the grey dust of the lane ; their skins harmonised with the brown and sunbaked mud of the walls ; their air of repose corresponded perfectly with the warm and slumbrous influence

of the hour. Even when they spoke their voices pleased. They were such tones as the lotus-eaters might have used, in that wonderful lotus-eating land where "all things always are the same."

Slowly the sunshine ebbed along the lane. Far off, the light danced in white flames upon a distant dome. At the street end a clump of palms showed pale as phantoms soaked in the radiance of noon. It was infinitely peaceful, infinitely quiet. The world lay submerged in a fathomless sea, "deeper than ever plummet sounded;" and we, motionless as men long drowned, lay at the bottom of this ocean, in a little cave of shadow.

CHAPTER XXVI.

WE ARRIVE AT ZAQUIAT RIBAH.

ATHMAN was in a state of high excitement. We were due to arrive at the oasis of his great-grandfather in the course of an hour.

It was the second day after our departure from Maghier. We had camped on the preceding night at Nza Ben Rzig—which, being interpreted, signifies the place where Ben Rzig died. Who the temporary possessor of this name had been, or what he had done to merit renown, Athman was unable to inform me. My charitable guide, however, was fully convinced that the deceased gentleman had passed a life of the greatest sanctity, and was in every way worthy of the candle which we presented to his tomb.

The ground over which we passed was sacred soil in the eyes of Athman. Not a hill, heaving itself out of the dun monotony, but held memories for him. Not a village, or clump of palms shimmering in the glare, but whispered to him of the past. A tiny oasis, called "The mother of the falcons," was pointed out to me with great pride, as belonging to a distant relative; a place where

he, Athman, had spent many happy days. A well in the desert, known as "Ain Kerna, or the Well of the Fig-tree," was hailed with ejaculations of affection, which, be it confessed, came perilously near to tears when he discovered that the familiar fig-tree was no more.

It was, however, upon his home—the oasis of Zaouïet Ribah—that Athman lavished the pent-up tenderness of his heart.

. "O Sidi!" he cried, "to think that in one little hour I shall see it again—the dear oasis that I remember so well. Ah, it is beautiful—but so beautiful! Imagine to yourself the dome of the holy tomb, as it were a bubble of camel's milk floating in the air; and behind, the fresh green of the palms. Ah, my great-grandfather's palms——"

"You call them his still, Athman?"

"But certainly, Sidi, since they belonged to him."

"But he has been dead so long."

"It matters not," he gesticulated with animation. "They are still his. Listen; I will tell you the story of them. When my great-grandfather died he left many palms, for he was rich, and this was what he said: 'I leave all my palm-trees, firstly—to the upkeep of my tomb; secondly—to give hospitality to strangers.' Sidi, these were his very words. Oh, it is a beautiful idea—although dead, he still feeds the hungry. How kind that is! how like my great-grandfather!"

Athman's face glowed—his voice rang with enthusiasm.

In a little time he spied the oasis. Unrest seized him. Nothing would do but that he must dismount and assist Abdullah to urge on the baggage-camel, who, it must be confessed, was inconsiderately lazy that morning. When that unaccountable animal utterly refused to quicken her steps—having no such incentive to exertion as an expectant tomb—he was all for mounting again, being convinced that were he but perched aloft as before, he could effectively spur the progress of the party.

Then, as though to pass the lazy-pacing time, he took to feverishly counting on his fingers.

“*Un, deux, trois,*” etc. But every time he reached the number five, he stopped and scratched his head. In answer to an inquiry, he replied :

“My presents, Sidi, my presents. Oh, I hope I have enough !”

“Presents !” I ejaculated. “What presents ?”

He turned on me a reproachful eye.

“For my relations, of course ; I hope I have forgotten no one ; it would be sad to forget even a little one of whose birth I knew nothing.”

He groped in the hood of his burnous, and drew from thence a parcel. Opening this, he submitted the contents to my inspection.

“Isn’t that pretty ?”—He held a tiny looking-glass at arms’-length. It was circular—set in red leather—a flap covered the glass. I expressed unqualified approval. Athman was delighted.

“It is for my aunt,” he chuckled with gusto. “How she will cry out with joy when she raises this flap and sees her own face. And this ! and

this ! and this ! ” One after another he dangled before my eyes a variety of articles : a bag of camel’s skin, covered with cheerful embroidery ; a chain of beads, that absolutely winked in the morning sun ; a charm for the cure of stomach-ache, wrapped in emerald green silk, of so delightfully mysterious a nature, that even to see it was to be seized with longing to explore its philanthropical contents.

“ Magnificent ! ” I cried.

“ I should think so,” he assented, nodding his head gravely, “ I know they are beautiful, because I am so sorry to part with them.”

We were by this time come to within a short distance of the oasis. Among the palm-trees, the dome of a Marabout’s tomb was to be seen. Covered with the usual white-wash, it shone conspicuous in the sunshine. Athman had become silent, but his parted lips and active eyes told of the feelings that glowed within him.

“ They are perhaps working in the fields,” he said at length ; his voice scarce raised above a whisper. Even as he spoke, I caught sight of a man engaged in irrigation. A primitive hoe was in his hand ; his haïk was kilted round his waist ; his naked feet splashed in the muddy water. Athman, shielding his eyes from the sun, gazed at him intently.

“ It is Aouïmer,” he cried in delight. “ Hola ! Aouïmer ! Aouïmer ! ”

The man, quitting the little patch below the palms, sprang to the pathway. The hoe fell from his hands—he stared at us open-mouthed, like one who sees a ghost.

"Alouï!" he screamed. And without another word he wheeled where he stood, and set off running towards the village.

Athman laughed aloud.

"He is my cousin," he explained in a voice tremulous with satisfaction. "He has gone to tell them that I am here. But how he has grown! I would not have believed it. Did you see his beard? Ah, he is a fine fellow. That is his garden! What healthy trees! yes; he was always a worker. O Sidi! is it not all beautiful? Did not I tell you true? *Mon Dieu!* how slow these camels are! I long to be there. Quicker! quicker!" and leaning down he beat the animal's neck with his open palm.

Gently we swayed along the narrow pathway. On either hand we were shut in by mud walls topped with the prickly points of palm-leaves. Before we had gone far, the village came into sight. At the same time cries were heard, and a crowd of men came racing to meet us.

Athman was out of his saddle in a twinkling. The crowd surrounded him with glad shouts of welcome. They caught at his hands—at his burnous—and, when that fell off, at his haïk. Not a soul but clamoured for his attention. All spoke at once—no one waited for a reply. The noise was deafening. Athman was tossed among them like a cork on an agitated sea. But—he enjoyed it. His black face turned this way and that, radiating happiness. He kissed one—embraced another—reached an enthusiastic arm over three intervening shoulders,

and clasped hands with a third. Joy was universal—it was, indeed, a red letter day for the tribe of Ben Salah.

At length we turned our steps villagewards. Athman, surrounded by relatives, walked in front. An old man leaned upon his shoulder—Aouïmer still retained possession of his hand. Hemming him in, marched others, listening open-mouthed to his words, and replying in chorus to his eager questions. Hovering upon the outskirts of the procession were children in a state of excitement and nudity. These little people listened for the sound of his voice, which, when heard, so filled them with joy that they felt themselves forced to turn somersaults in the dust. Even Abdullah joined the ranks of admirers. The camels and I followed modestly in the rear.

My tent had been pitched as usual beneath palm-trees on the outskirts of the village. Seated within it I awaited the return of Athman. Zaouiat Ribah had received him unto itself. The narrow lane that plunged into the labyrinth of mud huts had swallowed, not only my popular guide but the entire crowd as well. The camels and I were forgotten. These patient animals, hobbled for the night, stood disconsolately each on three legs, more than ever persuaded that times were out of joint and that the terrestrial globe was by no means a planet fitted for the habitation of camels.

The scene was deeply penetrated with the sentiment that haunts the approach of night. Across the tender spaces of sky flew flocks of little birds. They came from the desert in search of the water that

lay beneath the palm-trees. As they passed overhead I could hear their glad twittering and the rhythmic beating of their wings. Other sounds, too, broke upon the ear. From somewhere deep within the oasis came the noise of a camel's roar. The weird, melancholy cry stirred into consciousness strange feelings connected with far-away lands, it voiced all that was unfamiliar in my surroundings. Suddenly the beating of a drum attracted my attention. It came from the direction of the village. Feverishly it throbbed—ceased—then throbbed again. As I listened to it, a labourer passed silently on naked feet. His coarse haik kilted to his knees revealed the naked brown of his limbs. The level sunlight splashed him with stains of fugitive colour. For a time the scene before me was radiant with luminous green and gold, steeped in transient glory in which the stems of the many palm-trees glowed like flames in a dark sanctuary of shadow. Then, all at once, everything grew wan and grey. A veil of mystery fell from the sky. Only on the far horizon over dim spaces of desert a thin line of light told of the sun.

The sound of flying footsteps aroused me. It was Athman. Breathlessly he burst into the tent.

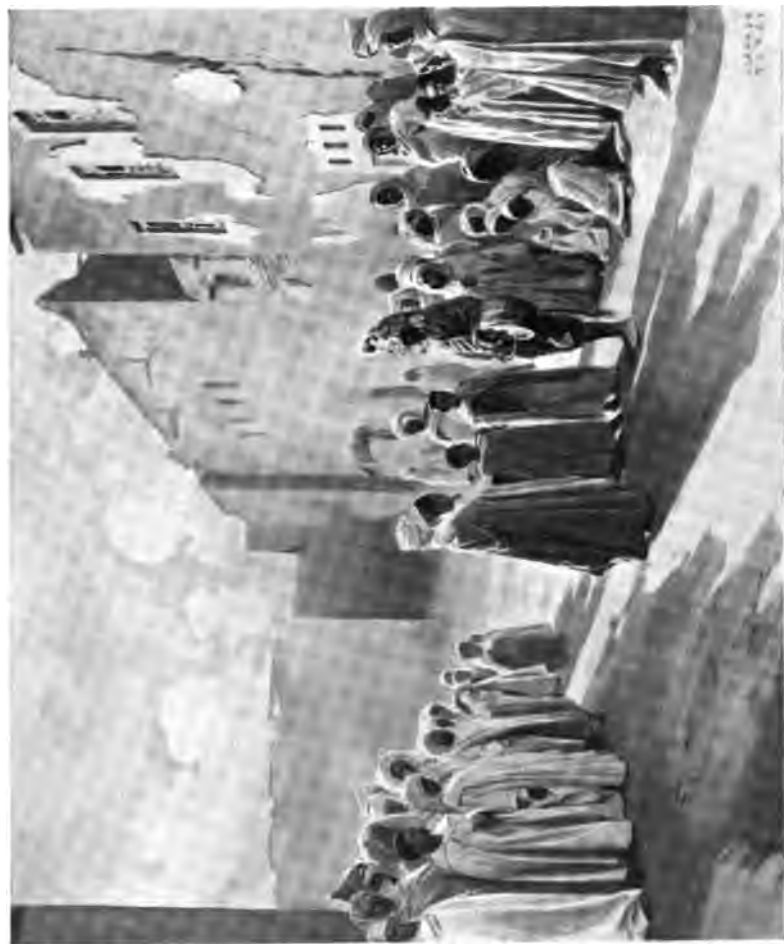
"O Sidi," he panted, "come quickly."

"Where, Athman?"

"To the village, of course. There is a feast to-night in my honour."

His manner was full of self-importance.

"Come, Sidi, come," he entreated, holding the tent flap open to its widest. "I have told of your



A negro from the South.

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great kindness to me. My uncle desires to thank you himself. All my relations will be present, also many friends. I wish to present them to you. I have told them that you are a prince in your own country."

"A prince," I cried aghast.

Athman chuckled at my surprise.

"But certainly, Sidi, they are ignorant people; it is necessary to impress them. They will do you much honour. Besides, if they think you are a prince they will be very pleased that I am your guide. And, moreover, the feast! Oh, *mon Dieu!* that is worth seeing. The women and children are making cous-cous now. Many fowls are to be killed. Then, Sidi, there is a negro from the South, a black man with a droll turban and a drum. It is most fortunate that he is here to-day. He will make you die of laughing, for when he beats his drum he dances and sings all at the same time. He is doing it now; we were all looking at him in the street in front of my uncle's house. Oh, please come, Sidi, he may have finished by the time we get back."

I shook my head. Despite the heartiness of the invitation, I made up my mind to refuse. The presence of a stranger, however well intentioned, could not but impart a touch of restraint to so purely domestic a gathering. They would, I felt assured, enjoy themselves better without me.

For long Athman combated my resolution, but I was not to be persuaded. At last he desisted, and reluctantly bade me good-night.

“ You have everything that you wish for, Sidi ? ”
His eyes roamed round the tent. The fire-wood stood ready ; my saddle-bags lay open to my hand.

“ Everything, Athman. Good-night, and enjoy yourself.”

His impatience to rejoin the merry-makers was very visible ; still, for a moment he lingered.

“ I wish much that you would come, Sidi. The negro is really very funny. And I shall not be able to return here when the feast is over.”

“ You sleep in the village to-night, then ? ”

“ No, no, to-night I do not sleep at all. To-night I watch and pray. Watch and pray.” He repeated the words solemnly, eyeing me at the same time as though he hoped that I was duly impressed.
“ Yes, Sidi, to-night I burn many candles at the holy tomb of my great-grandfather. It is an occasion I have looked forward to for many years. It may be that God will forgive my sins on account of his great holiness.”

His voice sank to a whisper of veneration ; his open palm pressed his forehead ; then, recovering his wonted manner, he bade me good-night and ran at full speed towards the village.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LITTLE FOX.

OUR departure from Zaouiat Ribah was the occasion of another public demonstration on the part of its inhabitants. The return of Athman, his fame as a poet, his position as guide to a Nazarene, and his great popularity, all had aroused the village to a high pitch of enthusiasm. Oriental indifference had given place to Oriental excitement. Nor is this remarkable, for an Oriental is either a blackened ember, or a red-hot coal—there is no intermediary state.

Needless to relate, the crowd that watched our departure was composed entirely of men and boys. But, though unavoidably absent, without a doubt the ladies of the tribe sent their thoughts after us, sighing them towards the sunshine and the dew-bespangled fragrance of the morning.

The laws that govern Mohammedan etiquette are strict as those that controlled the Medes and Persians. Even the aunt of Athman was not permitted to speed her departing nephew. But the imagination could picture her seated at the loom

in a dark interior, weaving faded memories and lifeless hopes into the warp and woof of an Arab haïk ; pausing at times to smile into Athman's gift, the little mirror, solacing herself for the absence of all things beautiful by the sight of her own unlovely face set in red leather.

We mounted our camels on the fringe of the oasis, where the palm-trees faced the South. Genuine regret at Athman's departure was voiced on all sides.

"Thou wilt not forget us, O Alouï !" implored an aged man, clasping my dusky guide repeatedly in his arms.

"How can that be, O my uncle ? Are ye not all, as it were, an oasis of love within my heart. Absence cannot uproot love, it grows deep. Allah is my witness."

"Thou wilt return ?" said Aouïmer wistfully, holding fast by the hem of his burnous.

"Of a surety, O my cousin !"

"But when—but when ?"

"Look for me before another moon has waned."

Many and various were the cries that arose.

"Allah speed thee !"

"Thy poetry has rejoiced our hearts."

"Beware of the Touaregs, O Alouï ; they are an evil people and an ever-present danger to such as travel in the desert."

"What fine raiment he hath."

"Ouah ! and how nobly he sitteth on his camel !"

"Allah ! he is an honour to the tribe of Ben Salah !"

"Farewell, O my nephew ; may thy journey be prosperous."

"Farewell, O my cousin ; every night will I look for thee when my work is done."

"Farewell ! farewell !"

And so we left them, a little white-robed company, with sunlight on their faces and goodwill in their hearts.

As we swayed gently onwards, I had time to note the bulky appearance of my guide : he was laden with gifts, the parting and substantial proofs of affection. These comprised a piece of roasted mutton ; a gourd filled with camel's milk ; Arab cakes, thin, circular, and crisp ; a supply of dates of a juicy and amber transparency—his great-grandfather's dates, of the superior quality known as deglet-nour ; and—how far from least—a baby fox.

The last-mentioned offering was in every way the most remarkable. It had been captured that morning in the desert by his uncle, who at once presented it to Athman. The presentation gave rise to much merriment on the part of the Arabs. Everyone had a joke to crack at its expense. The singular inappropriateness of the gift occurred to no one, not even to the recipient, who, with a pleased smile on his face, sat nursing it within the folds of his burnous. That the poor little creature was too young to be separated from its mother was plainly visible. It still counted its birthdays in hours—though how many I am unable to state.

To my eyes, it presented the most pitiable ap-

pearance, its one idea being to shrink into the smallest space, and to escape, as far as might be, from the great hostile world that was to it a mystery and a terror. It appeared to be suffering from several of the ills that fur is heir to. Its shrinking, trembling little mat of a body was a pathetic protest against life in general, and against its own ill-starred existence in particular. Its scarce-opened eyes were full of sadness. Its small and feverish nose betrayed a longing to burrow into the unexplored regions of Athman's burnous. It was for ever working itself round to the small of his back, and being pulled out again by my anxious guide, who was convinced that sunlight and fresh air were necessary to the well-being of foxes.

"What will you do with it?" I inquired, as we headed for the desert.

"I will teach him to love me," rejoined Athman cheerfully. "He will grow into a great fox. He will look well in Biskra, following me always when I am engaged as guide; and when I go to Egypt—*allons! petit vaut rien! viens ici!*" and he broke off, to excavate his new possession from the inner darkness of his clothing.

"It is too young to travel," I said. "And besides, it does not look strong; its nose is dry."

Athman felt the organ in question with anxiety.

"*C'est vrai!*" he ejaculated; "it is dry, and very hot. What can I do? Poor little fox, he must be ill; he has fever; or——" His face lighted with a bright idea. "Perhaps he is only hungry!"

"Perhaps," I said doubtfully. The invalid was shivering in the sunlight.

"He is only a baby," continued Athman, with renewed cheerfulness. "It is natural for him to be hungry. How often is it necessary to feed a baby, Sidi?"

I pondered deeply.

"*Eh bien?*" prompted Athman, fondling the little head.

"I seem to have heard," I said at length, "that babies require to be fed every two hours."

"As often as that! O Sidi!"

I nodded.

"Poor little fox!" cried Athman, in a wave of self-reproach. "It is not astonishing that his nose is dry; he is starving! Ah! how fortunate it is that Aouïmer gave me so much camel's milk."

The caravan halted to permit of a meal being prepared for the infant; but, alas! it would have none of it. Athman was in despair.

"It is too young to lap," I said sadly, "or perhaps pure milk is too strong for it; you might dilute it with water."

He caught at the idea with eagerness. The water-skin was unslung; the milk diluted, but still the little fox refused to lap.

Athman, seated on the ground, dipped his black finger into the milk and held it to the animal's mouth. The infant smelt it, its weak eyes blinking in the glare, its tail nerveless as a pendant rag; then, as we watched, a tiny red tongue stole forth

and daintily licked the finger-tip. Athman was jubilant.

"He! he!" he chuckled, with his inimitable negro laugh. "*Ça va! Ça va!* He thinks that I am his mother. Encore! *petit drôle*," and again he presented a dripping finger. But the little fox would no more be tempted. Its head drooped, as though too heavy for the feeble neck, and in a timid and despondent manner it sought to creep again under the burnous folds.

On the following day, while it was yet early, the fox died. Athman had been unremitting in his attentions. To the last, he refused to believe in the approach of death, and when I pointed out that the infant was sinking fast, the only answer I received was :

"He must not die. I will not let him die. He will grow into a great fox. You will see."

In the early part of the night, after a long and vain attempt to persuade the little creature to partake of nourishment, he nursed it to sleep within the inner folds of his burnous, seeking to comfort the shivering little body with the warmth of his own person.

He sat by my bedside within the shelter of the tent. The dying embers of our fire shone upon his face ; its solicitude was touching to witness. The fox's head lay upon his arm ; its eyes were closed ; it appeared to have resigned itself to its fate.

The firelight dulled to a point, then died. The wailing of the wind sounded sad in the night. The blackness within the tent was impenetrable, but

without, over a mass of obscurity, which I knew for the desert, I could see the stars.

On the following morning I was early awake. The air was cold, it set me sneezing. Dawn was at hand. The black veil of night had given place to an ethereal blue, woven in the loom of morning. Birds twittered softly in the newly-awakened world. The palms—for we had encamped by the oasis of Moggar—had breathed deeply and freely all night long, and now were whispering together. Even lacking such audible proof, I could have told of their presence; for somewhat of their fragrance, the cool green smell of leaves, was wafted in at the tent door.

Athman was seated where I had seen him last. His head had fallen backwards and rested on the foot of my camp-bed. He was asleep. I aroused him—not without difficulty.

“Where is the fox?” I questioned.

Mechanically he felt within his burnous, uttered a low cry, and withdrew something—something small and brown, and lifeless, that touched the heart.

“He is dead!” he whispered in awestruck tones; then, his voice rising to a wail: “He is dead, and I—*Mon Dieu!*—I slept!”

The funeral took place after breakfast. The interval between death and interment is but short in Southern lands. Nature wills it so, and her children are obliged to obey her laws.

Abdullah was not invited to the ceremony. We did not know in what spirit he might accept the

invitation. He was capable of jesting ; we could not have borne that.

Side by side we left the tent, Athman carrying the fox. No one spoke. The brightness and beauty of the sunrise jarred upon us. Under a young palm-tree, hard by a brook that babbled in green shadow, we made a little grave. Athman chose the spot. He did not give me his reasons, but I knew that the promise of shade and the presence of running water appealed to him. It was a spot where one would like to rest. The breeze would oftentimes sing a lullaby among the branches, and when it was silent, the little brook would take up the song. There would always be music.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MOGGAR.

MOGGAR panted in the glare of noon. The houses stood in rows upon the rising ground, huddled together, supporting each other. They resembled a multitude of blind men, their brown faces all aflame in the sun, their sightless eyes straining in vain over the belt of palms towards the desert.

Leaving our little camp, I turned my steps towards the town. No one noticed my departure; Athman, his peace of mind completely restored, was deep in an ode to the fox; Abdullah lay asleep in the shadow of my tent; the camels formed a select coterie at a little distance.

Heat, silence, desolation inexpressible, brooded over Moggar. So apparently abandoned did it lie in the fierce glare of the sun, that it well might have been a city of the dead, a thing stricken by the plague, from which all life had fled in terror long ago. The very air stagnated.

A winding path led me onwards; on one hand, a high wall overhung by palms, on the other, a ditch filled with ooze and black slime. A dead goat lay upon the farther bank, a crawling mass of flies.

Beyond the ditch, a dusty line of cactus led the eyes upwards to the walls of the town. They were tinged with violet ; for the bricks of which they are composed have the peculiarity of attracting colour, corresponding to the phases of the day. Thus in the morning they become rose, at noon violet, in the evening orange.

At times my path was checkered with light and shadow, a network of counterfeit leafage, motionless as the reality above. Every delicate, tapering growth traced itself with fidelity in the white dust. The palms beyond stood erect ; they resembled green parasols opened for the delectation of the Faithful. They wheeled to the right in a long graceful curve, the stems receding into shadow, the foliage lustrous with sunlight.

A gate broke the blind monotony of the outer wall, a square opening, consisting of two uprights supporting a crossbeam, all fashioned out of rude palm-tree logs. As I entered it with a breathless feeling of expectancy, my footsteps inaudible in the dust, I stumbled over one of a row of sleeping figures. Side by side they lay, within the shadow of the porch. They had the appearance of corpses. Some were enveloped from head to foot in shrouds of sackcloth ; others, under the influence of sleep, having tossed aside the burnous, their upturned faces shone with perspiration ; flies settled on them un-reproved. But one alone, an old man whom I had disturbed, raised his head. In reply to my salutation, "Peace be with thee," he returned, "And with thee, peace." His voice scarcely stirred the

quiet air. No sooner were the languid words uttered than his head drooped ; he sank again to the ground, the flies resettled in myriads.

Children flitted before me, a flutter of curiosity and fear—children naked, or clothed in rags of so tattered a nature that the marvel was they were able to hang upon the diminutive bodies.

A little girl was particularly noticeable. She wore a single rose-coloured garment, reaching to her knees. A lock of black hair, terminating in a large cownut bead, hung between her eyes. When she ran—which she did with inconceivable swiftness, leaping from side to side like one possessed—she looked like an animated flame. In the porch of a Mosque two Arabs were seated, facing each other. They had traced a chess-board in the dust, and, with pebbles in lieu of chess-men, were enjoying a friendly contest.

From an adjacent courtyard came the neigh of a horse. The sound startled me ; in the midst of this wide quietness it struck discordantly on the ear. An Arab stallion stood arching his neck and flicking at the flies with his long tail. His nostrils dilated, his coat shone in the sun. He was beautiful as a picture. An old man came forward, introducing himself as the Caïd of Moggar. For some time he conversed with great affability, informing me that he had purchased the horse, when a foal, for five hundred francs, had broken it in himself, and was deeply attached to it, as indeed he well might be.

The possession of a valuable horse is a mark of

social distinction in the eyes of the Arabs ; it commands for its owner the respect of his fellow-men.

Bidding farewell to the Caïd, I wandered along the lane. Before I had gone far, I was greeted by an unexpected sound. Through the torpid air came a droning as of many voices. It broke upon the ear, died away, and again swelled in fitful chorus. I looked around. The lane lay empty, one side in sunlight, the other in shadow. Mud dwellings, windowless, mysterious, hemmed me in. The ground, dusty and stone-bestrewn, led onwards between naked walls to where, at no great distance, a sudden turning veered to the right. Again and again the chorus greeted me, and as I advanced with cautious step, it appeared to me that its volume increased, until, reaching the turning, I came full upon the reason of the outcry—a school !

A school in Moggar ! The idea verged on the impossible. What seat of juvenile learning could hope to prosper in that old sun-steeped town, ruinous, desolate, sleep-oppressed, where the very air lay dead in the silent streets. And yet—there it was !

An old and gnarled fig-tree grew at the lane side. Its stem reared itself from the base of the mud wall, and slanting upwards to a height of some ten feet spread its arms across the lane. Its broad, beautiful leaves glistening and motionless in the radiant air seemed to absorb the sunlight ; they glowed in vivid lights and made for themselves retreats of emerald-tinted shadow.

Beneath the fig-tree was a door-way of rough

palm-tree logs, set in the mud wall. The slanting stem all but concealed it from view, and indeed, so obstructed the passage, that it became necessary to step over the lower portion of the bole in order to effect an entrance. In front of this rude door were many little pairs of shoes, arranged neatly two by two. Some were Arab sandals of yellow leather, others followed the Turkish fashion of coquettishly pointing the toes ; one diminutive pair, proudly monopolising a patch of sunlight, lorded it over its neighbours with scraps of tinsel ; while yet another, fashioned out of rough and unpainted wood, had withdrawn to a little distance, as though sadly conscious of social inferiority.

Through the open doorway came the babel of children's voices. Stealing forward, and taking advantage of the cover afforded by the fig-tree, I peeped within. The master sat cross-legged upon a square of palm-tree matting, the butt-end of a long bamboo cane within his hand. His turban was awry ; his head, tilted backward, rested against the brown wall ; his eyes were semi-closed ; his whole appearance was listless, somnolent. School was to him a weariness ; his thoughts were doubtless of the Arab café at the far end of the lane, or of the siesta to be enjoyed in the shadow of a sun-baked wall. Before him, likewise cross-legged on the floor, were seated the scholars. My heart warmed to them at once, they were so small, so brightly clad, so desperately in earnest. Every little fellow grasped a slate upon which were written verses from the Koran. One and all were in full

cry. Each sentence necessitated a straightening of the body to breathe, a low obeisance, and a shrill and unanimous outburst. The words were indistinguishable. The noise however was great, and spoke well for the lung power of the youthful theologians. I listened, smiling. To my mind it resembled nothing so much as the clamour of puppies—puppies trained to hold slates, to masquerade in rags, and to yelp discreetly in chorus.

Flecks of sunlight splashed the ground ; a bee droned past on murmurous errand ; a lizard appeared suddenly, paused to survey me with bright and unwinking eyes, then vanished with silent celerity into a cavity in the mud wall. The outside world cried aloud to the senses ; it beckoned with sunlit fingers ; it set little feet a-dancing with impatience to be off ; it even reminded juvenile sportsmen of the game of marbles which awaited them when school was over ; and yet, O shackles of unwelcome civilisation !—the Koran had to be learned.

Growing less cautious I ventured nearer. Fatal indiscretion ! One of the scholars spied me. His eyes became two circular wells of amazement. His slate fell to the ground. The chorus swung forward without him. But he did not care. His brown face shone with the consciousness of a secret, shared by no one ; and for a full minute he sat hugging the wonder of my existence to his small and parti-coloured chest.

His joy however was short-lived ; danger was in the air. The master's gaze was upon him.



The game of marbles.

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ASTOR, LENOX AND
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Relentlessly the bamboo rose and fell. It came into contact with a diminutive, closely-shaven, and comparatively vacant skull. There was a pitiable sound, as though you had rapped with your knuckle on an empty box, followed closely by an indignant cry. I quailed before it, for was not I the real culprit? To my consternation I was immediately denounced by a small but passionate forefinger. The entire school sprang to its feet. Discretion counselled flight; in another moment the shade of the fig-tree knew me no more.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DESERT BRIDE.

AGAIN we swayed leisurely through the sunlight. This time with a growing sense of expectancy, for on the morrow we made certain to reach Tougourt, the old Arab town which was to be the farthest limit of our journey.

Never before had I seen the desert more gloriously, more fiercely, alive. It seemed to feel that we were leaving it, and in a final effort to drain our hearts of admiration, put forth all its powers of allurements. It discarded even the farthest suspicion of greenery ; it swept its oases back into the shimmering distance, and leading us out into barren sunlit places, stood before us like a goddess, radiant in nakedness.

Sand, sand, sand ; and ever as the eye roamed seeking to pierce beyond the quivering horizon, sand, and sand again. It lay before us, a heavy track into which the feet of our camels sank as though they stepped on newly-fallen snow. It closed in on us from behind, obliterating all trace of passage, creeping stealthily after us, shutting out the world, drawing us to itself, impressing on our dazzled senses

that all else was but a dream, and sand alone the stuff of which reality was composed. It reared itself high into dunes on either hand, ribbed as the margin of the sea, shifting and crumbling to the touch of the wind—molten goblets filled with fire and encompassed with flame. It lured us onwards to where, on the far horizon, it assumed strange shapes—cliffs of gleaming whiteness, ravines of mysterious shadow. And ever as we advanced it receded, beckoning always, exulting in its power, and might, and beauty.

The sun decked it in glory. Fierce lights ran on feet of flame over the burning hills. Hot colours came and went, now singly, now in an indescribable riot, wave meeting wave, orange melting into gold, carmine quivering into blue. At our feet and strewn on either hand were points of fire, sunlit flints that distressed the eye.

Silence weighed upon it. With all its vitality of light and colour, of living flame and molten atmosphere, this region of sand lay a dumb thing staring upwards at the sun.

Solitude brooded over it. The sense of loneliness was very real. We were but a point of insignificant animation wandering in an ever-present circle.

I sat my camel like a man in a dream. Everything appeared so steeped in the light of unreality, that I had to tell myself many times that I was awake in order to believe in the wonder of my surroundings. My camel, moving phantomwise with rhythmic motion and long, inaudible strides; Athman, a ghostly guide looming mistily through a

halo of light ; our very shadows, nightmares of distortion, creeping after us like attendant dreams—all seemed the concomitant parts of a vision, flung against the supremely visionary background of the desert. With semi-closed eyes I watched it wonderingly, prepared for any change, however fantastic ; but hour followed hour, and still we swayed forwards, and still the desert lured us into the unknown.

At length we rounded a sand-dune, and headed more directly towards the south. All at once, Athman, who was leading by a few paces, drew himself up and said :

“ There seems a little air from the west, Sidi.”

A puff of wind was indeed to be felt. It came to us from over the naked shoulder of the dune—a breathless gasp, as though the hill of sand panted hot in our faces. It afforded no relief. I sighed wearily, and essayed to stretch my stiffening limbs.

“ When do we camp, Athman ? ”

“ When the sun sets, Sidi ; in two hours at most.”

I relapsed into dreams. Athman too refrained from conversation ; it was as though he feared to break the silence. Slowly our shadows lengthened. The colours, leaping to fresh life, became every moment more beautiful. An iridescent haze, glittering like cloth-of-gold, yet diaphanous as a morning mist, moved tremblingly before us. The air was all fire, and yet overhead the sky seemed roofed with rainbows. The desert grew in loveliness and mystery as day declined.

Again Athman sat erect.

"Something comes!" he cried.

I followed his outstretched finger. A speck, a blur, a streak of far-off life approached us from the southward. We watched it breathlessly.

"A caravan!" I exclaimed. "And but one camel!"

Athman gazed long from under his raised hand.

"It must be—— I am sure! It is!"

"What?" I cried.

"A marriage, Sidi." He turned to me impetuously, his face radiant with sympathetic interest. "It is like that in my country. You see the palanquin on that camel's back? *Eh, bien!* that contains the bride." He beamed upon me with the air of one who imparts a mysterious yet delightful secret. "Yes, Sidi, she is truly there; *la pauvre petite!* Her relations and friends are taking her to the village of the bridegroom, who I am sure is longing for her with a great passion. Ah, it is very interesting—very romantic! O Sidi! I like a marriage! It means love, and also——" he chuckled, eyeing me with roguish smile, "also, much to eat!"

"But, Athman——"

He did not hear me. With a laugh he had sprung to the ground and was hastening to meet the approaching caravan.

To think even of that procession makes me long for some medium other than words with which to describe it. It calls insistently for the brush of an artist. Had Turner painted in the Sahara he

could have given us a pictorial memory of the scene—of the little desert-ship laden with romance, silently parting the golden mists, stealing upon us from the unknown.

The camel came first. Scarlet trappings swung to its onward movement—long tassels swayed in the sun. Upon its back it bore a palanquin covered with draperies of purple and gold. This small aerial house lurched tremulously against the blue of the sky. One feared for its safety.

Slowly the animal approached. His air of pride, as though conscious of the delicate importance of his burden, was delightful to witness. The curtains of the palanquin were jealously closed. No sign of the occupant met the gaze. The imagination alone could picture the bride dressed in all her finery, seated in her swaying prison, lighted by the dim colours that flushed through sunlit curtains—dreaming, who shall say what dreams of love and fear, of hope and fluttering expectancy.

Following the camel came the wedding guests—some on foot, others on donkeys. The men were dressed entirely in white, the only dark touch in their costumes being the ropes of camels' hair with which they encircled their turbans. Donkeys being at a premium, every diminutive steed had no less than two riders. One unfortunate little animal even staggered forward under the united weight of an old man, a young woman, and a little girl. The child was seated precariously on the root of the donkey's tail ; her legs clung to his straining flanks with the tenacity of a limpet.

The procession straggled far. Many of the would-be merry-makers were weary. All were foot-sore ; for, as we discovered, they had been on the march for three days, and expected another to elapse before reaching their destination.

An old woman came last. She halted pitiably. Exhaustion was to be read in every line of her drooping figure, in her shuffling and uncertain steps, in her bowed head, in the feverish grasp with which she clung to a bundle wrapped in a pale green cloth. Her marriage dress of a bright blue, which doubtless she had put on with long anticipated joy, was sadly dragged ; it trailed behind her on the sand ; it had ceased to occupy her attention. The poor old thing hobbled past us without so much as a glance of momentary curiosity. Her whole soul was centred in the receding caravan, and in the hopeless endeavour to overtake it. She longed to lie down and sleep, and yet—the desert ! Fear dominated her—fear visible in the anxious eyes and muttering lips that said as plainly as if one heard the words : “ If I should be left behind ! ”

Athman, running back to us, detached the skin of camel's milk from the pack-saddle and hastened after her. At first he could not induce her to stop. But as he persevered I saw her seize the skin and drink deep, spilling most of its contents in her haste. The draught revived her, and it was with a lighter and more hopeful step that she tottered after her companions.

We watched them dwindle into the distance. The level sunlight fell upon them. Around and above,

waves of liquid heat ebbed and flowed. Smaller and still smaller they grew, till they were but a mote in the eye of the setting sun. Then they vanished, the wastes lay empty, and all silently, like one re-entering his home, the spirit of solitude stalked in.

Night had come. I lay in my tent awaiting sleep. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the sound of music came to my ears. Low, melodious, liquid, the notes stole in at the tent door and set me wondering. I knew them to be the voice of Athman's flute, but why should he play thus when all the camp was immersed in sleep? Impelled by curiosity I sprang to my feet, crossed to the door and gazed out into the night. The desert lay before me, shrouded in darkness, yet flushed with starlight. Noticeable among the many heavenly bodies, one planet, like a silver lamp, swung low in the sky. It pointed directly towards the south. Its rays focussed themselves upon the brain with a radiance that eclipsed all other lights.

Our camp had been pitched in the open. The immensities of space lay around us. The horizon was lost in semi-obscurity, a blur of shadow merging into a depth of blue. The pathless desert and the trackless heaven were for the moment one—one in mystery, one in beauty, one—under the myriad-eyed vigilance of night.

At a little distance from where I stood, lay the camels. They formed a group around Abdullah, who slept peacefully in their midst. Details were lost in shadow; only the head of one of the animals

raised for a moment showed mistily. To the left, seated on a stone, was Athman. His back was turned to me. The starlight shining on his fez caused it to glow with a faint warmth of colour that attracted the attention. Unconscious of my presence he sat absorbed in music. The air which he played was familiar ; in it I recognised the melody which had been taught him long ago by the aged musician, the air which he had called the Voice of the South.

Its haunting quality, heard thus in the silence of night, surrounded on all sides by the starlit desert, affected the imagination powerfully. It awoke a vague uneasiness akin to the presage of coming disaster, and I fell to wondering if it in any way overshadowed events connected with the future. It was of many moods. It passed in rapid transition from the wild and barbarous to the soft and seductive, from quiet passages peopled with dreams, to breathless notes of unrestrained passion. At times it cried aloud with a voice so full of longing, so resonant with the birth-throes of emotion, so hot with youth, and life, and love, that it seemed impossible that it was but a bloodless sound, wailing over desolate wastes of sand.

At length, after a bar of unusual wistfulness, the music ceased. With his elbow resting on his knee, his chin on his hand, Athman sank into thought. His motionless figure showed indistinct against the darker background of shadow. He appeared to be gazing at the planet that hung, a globe of white fire, in the Southern sky.

For long I stood watching—waiting—but all was still. Athman did not move ; the silence was unbroken. Only a sigh of air stirred lightly ; and once a meteor shot from the zenith, passing into darkness before it reached the earth.

Overhead the stars shone in the great blue vault of night, and, faintly illuminated by their rays, the desert lay beneath them lost in dreams.

CHAPTER XXX.

MY ARAB HOME.

It has been my fortune to inhabit many strange dwellings, but none more strange than the Arab house engaged for me by Athman in the old sun-steeped town of Tougourt.

The courtyard lay open to the sky. A great palm sprung from the dusty ground near the house, and shooting aloft spread its fan of beautiful leaves into the light. It was towards this crown of foliage that my eyes turned with pleasure the first thing in the morning and the last at night. At dawn it caught the young light as in a net—it was the resort of birds, who having slept all night long among its branches, made the morning glad with their twitter—it hung breathless, a radiant thing long before the grey of the court flushed into day. At night it was no less beautiful, for when darkness fell it became the retreat of impenetrable shadows—fringed with the delicacy of fretted leaves—set in the starlit spaces of the sky.

No other palms could be seen from my courtyard—my neighbours not being so privileged as I in the matter of trees—but despite this fact, the

little open space was interesting to me for another reason. If I stood in the left hand corner so as to command the breach in the wall facing south, I could see the minaret of the great Mosque soaring into the blue. This to me was a daily pleasure. Five times in the twenty-four hours did this minaret raise its voice and summon the faithful to prayer. Others did so too, but their voices were thin and distant, and were always drowned for me by this one wailing cry that cut the silence as with a knife. Standing there in the shadow of my house, with eyes fixed on the summit of the minaret, I could distinguish the white draperies of the priest—a distant point of light dyed in the transient colours of the hour.

At the foot of the great palm, four stones and several morsels of charred wood showed where the last occupants had made their fire. The flames had blackened the stem to a height of three feet.

Upon the ground floor were three rooms, one of which had been used as a stable. The others I appointed to Athman and Embareck—the Arab servant whom I engaged to assist my guide. I had some compunction in doing so, as no European would have consented to occupy them. In Athman's room a portion of the ceiling alone remained intact. A large hole yawned in the floor—the cavity overhead corresponded to the gulf below and led one to suppose that some projectile or other weighty object descending from the roof had crashed through the entire building.

A staircase built into the mud wall led to the first

floor. It consisted of twenty-three steps. So narrow was it, so steep, so eccentric, so unprotected by balustrade, so worn by the pressure of countless feet, that it became an ever-menacing danger. I lived in constant fear of breaking my neck, particularly at night, when I was forced to mount it by the inadequate light of a candle. At length, reaching caution through sad experience, I set myself to learn it by heart. Thus I came to know that the fourth step was split in two places, and shelved to a fine edge; that the twelfth and seventeenth were twice as high as their neighbours; that the twenty-first was simply a hole yearning to trip the unwary; and that one and all allowed but space sufficient for the points of the toes in ascending, and the heels in the descent.

My own room was situated at the end of a passage. In order to reach it I was forced to circumnavigate the afore-mentioned hole which, if I were not careful, would have precipitated me, not only into the room occupied by Athman, but even into the cellars below. The floor was composed of mud beaten hard by constant pressure. On windy days the clouds of dust became well nigh insufferable. When, to overcome this nuisance, I sprinkled it with water, the semi-liquid mud sucked at the feet. Over the door, in lieu of a curtain, hung a camel's hide. It was a doubtful blessing, as owing to its being imperfectly cured, it was distinctly evil-smelling. From my one window, paned with squares of cloth instead of glass, I commanded a view of the court, the lane, and the roofs of the adjoining houses.

Many would find nothing to admire, much it might be to awaken aversion, in the strange dwelling in which I lived—in its ruinous condition—in its haunting sadness—its air of mystery—its sudden inexplicable noises, heard in the hush of night, or in the hours of heavy noonday heat, when something whispered, sighed, and passed at once into silence—silence so intense that its very noiselessness became audible within one's ears. And yet, it fascinated me. Yes, it fascinated me in spite of myself, for even when most it pleased, it aroused sombre thoughts ; as though in some vague undefined way, not known and but dimly felt, it was associated with a tragic past.

The stamp of immense age lay upon all. Everything in the dwelling gave the impression of being old beyond belief. Even the great palm conveyed this indescribable sensation of antiquity, of having witnessed so many sunrises and sunsets, of having heard so many calls to prayer, of having overshadowed so many lives within the past that it cared not at all for the unimportant present.

In a corner of my room we found a woman's haïk—a poor, ragged garment, but still bearing signs of bygone prettiness. It was the only clue we possessed.

When first I made the acquaintance of my house it was in possession of a crowd of Arabs whom Athman had engaged to sweep all superfluous matter from the rooms to the courtyard and from the courtyard to the street. Amidst clouds of dust strange figures wielded palm-leaf brooms—hoarse

cries and guttural exclamations struck upon the ear. Athman had difficulty in making himself heard.

"Embareck!" he shouted, "where are you? Come here."

A moment's interval and a little figure emerged from the obscurity. Athman whispered to me from behind an impressive hand:

"Sidi, this is Embareck. It is my advice that you engage him as your servant. He may perhaps be useful. And then he will add to our importance in Tougourt. He is a great huntsman. He will tell us many stories of the chase. I have told him that you love stories."

His anxiety lest I should consider the services of an Arab huntsman superfluous, amused me. Upon my consenting to his proposal he gave vent to loud expressions of joy, and with his assistance a bargain was struck which gave satisfaction to everyone concerned. It was a luxury perhaps, but one which I never regretted, so picturesque was the little man, so well did his appearance chime with the unusual character of my surroundings.

Embareck was well below the medium height. One of his legs, injured by a kick from an ostrich, was shorter than the other by several inches. His face, wizened and furrowed by life-long exposure to sun and storm, was lighted by one eye of inconceivable alertness; its fellow had unavoidably retired from the contemplation of things in general by reason of an accident in the days of his youth. An enormous hat, covered with the black feathers of

the male-ostrich, dangled between his shoulder-blades. He was inordinately proud of his head-dress, although he never by any chance used it otherwise than as a pendant. Enveloping his meagre little body was a burnous of a dusty grey colour, rent in many places, and so inappropriately large that it might well have belonged to a man of double his stature. Beneath the lower hem of this garment appeared two naked legs, lean and wiry as whipcord, the naked feet being thrust into heel-less Arab slippers formerly of polished green leather, but dulled by years of constant wear to a grey as nondescript as his cloak.

On Embareck's usefulness it is perhaps ungenerous to cast a doubt, seeing that he was to me a source of constant pleasure. To see him polishing his long Arab gun ; smoking keef in his tiny-bowled pipe ; performing his devotions—a small but immensely dignified figure, with the large ostrich feather hat ever between his shoulders ; or, better than all, to hear him relate anecdotes connected with his sporting past, was worth many times the sum which he accepted in exchange for the privilege of his society. He was a man who in his time had played many parts—had scoured the desert from El Agouat to El Oued, from the frontiers of Tunisia to the confines of Morocco ; had served his time in the Tirailleurs ; had laboured at artesian wells, with all the while one passion—the chase ; and one true love—the ostrich. Antelopes ! bah ! Embareck dismissed them with a gesture, his one eye flashing contempt—but ostriches, ah ! and from his tone

you understood at once that it was a question of something worthy of respect. Then would he plunge into some hazardous adventure, and as his eager words stumbled from his lips his diminutive body shook with excitement and his little lame foot beat a feverish march on the ground.

According to Embareck, to shoot the ostrich was a matter of great difficulty. They were few in number and extremely wild. There were times however when they could be tracked with reasonable hope of success. In the fierce heats of summer when droughts sucked dry the desert springs, they wandered northwards in search of water. They travelled by night, covering long distances with amazing speed. Their coming was always uncertain; the greatest patience and endurance was necessary to intercept their flight, or to track them to their haunts among the sand-dunes of the South. The hunter must be prepared to follow them with the tenacity of a sleuth-hound—to face heat, loneliness, monotony, disappointment; in a word, to endure all the vicissitudes of a hunter's life in the Sahara.

When Embareck related his experiences he fell at once under the spell of reality. Now he was the man—now the ostrich. He pursued; he fled; he crouched; he sprang. On hands and knees he stalked imaginary game over the courtyard. With the folds of his immense burnous he imitated the tremulous movement of wings. He lay motionless under the wall—and you knew it for a sand-dune. He peered with his one unwinking eye down the

deserted lane—and you listened breathless, for the footfall of his prey. Step by step with inimitable pantomime he conjured back the past, breathing the fire of his enthusiasm into scenes long gone by, till they sprang to life vivid with the reality of the present. As I listened, far regions of untrodden sand—the sweep of a limitless horizon—long marches without water, without shade, without companionship, all lay before me. I saw them all. My eyes gazing far South spied the little insignificant figure—a mere pin-point of animation creeping over immensities of space—watching, waiting, enduring—the incarnate lust of Sport pitting its tiny human strength against the appalling desolation of the desert.

CHAPTER XXXI.

UPON THE HOUSE-TOP.

TOWARDS evening Athman and I mounted to the flat roof to enjoy the sunset. The languor of day had given place to the cool pleasure that precedes the night. Shadows stretched eastwards, falling like blue gulfs across the plains of architecture. Even those parts of the narrow streets that lay open to the sun and air were plunged in obscurity. Night had already encamped her dusky legions within the town ; but along the tops of the walls and upon any pre-eminent point that fronted the west the light still ran on feet of flame.

From the lane that wound past my house came the sound of conversation. Invisible though the passers-by remained to us, by reason of the outer courtyard wall, we yet could guess at their whereabouts aided by the nearing or receding sound of voices. There was something almost uncanny in the strange guttural noises that welled from these sunken streets. They broke unexpectedly on the deep silence. They told of no benign or cordial feelings. Anger seemed to prompt them. They gave the listener the impression of having strayed

into some hostile city ; of being surrounded on all sides by spirits, breathing the deep-sunken, unquenchable fanaticism of the East.

At times another noise made itself felt, very soft and intermittent. It rose and fell upon the gentle evening airs that bore it away and brought it back to us by turns. It told of the distant market-place and the stir of animation that awakens at dusk.

Many roofs lay naked to curiosity. On some were stacked palm-branches ; on others quantities of dates basked in the sun. Two women were engaged in sifting the latter upon the warm roof of a house that lay upon the far side of the lane. Their backs were bent. When they stood erect I could see that they were veiled. Their sombre clothing and the air of secrecy with which they worked heightened the mysterious effect. We wondered who they might be, and what their position was within that mud-built house with its air of melancholy seclusion.

"In ten minutes it will be night," said Athman. "Look there, Sidi ; in the desert, *là bas*"—he pointed eastwards. "Night has already come."

I followed his finger over a misty line of palms to where the desert fronted the East. There were mountains there, and valleys—great plains and desolate uplands—all of sand. The solemn withdrawal of light had robbed them of none of their fascination. On the contrary, it had endowed them with an additional sense of aloofness, of isolation akin to that of some inaccessible mountain-top. They had lost their fiery glory, it is true ;

wings of white flame no longer beat above them, but with the approach of night had come oblivion. The blue glooms were already a resting-place, sacred to sleep, peaceful with the promise of stars.

To the West a warm flush spread upwards, melting imperceptibly into an ocean of faint emerald green. Against this roseate glow the dome of the great Mosque and the slender structure of the minaret stood out in trenchant contrast, black as though hewn out of solid ebony. The stem of the old palm-tree soared out of the shadow at our feet. Far overhead it drooped its canopy of leaves—a thing of beauty, of netted lights and shadows, of delicate tracery touched here and there by fingers of flame.

A film of smoke floated in the air ; it rose from adjacent courtyards and lay in horizontal lines immediately above the roofs of the houses. The smoke from camel's dung and dried palm branches mingled with the pungent fumes of Arab cookery ; it smelt acrid within the nostrils. The unfamiliar odour with its suggestion of strange customs impressed itself indelibly upon the senses. To me, standing there in the gathering dusk, it came in an almost tangible shape, as though the elusive spirit of the scene had indeed embodied itself in a subtle sense of smell—a presence that would ever afterwards survive with just this same faint acrid appeal to recollection. More than anything else it emphasized the impression of extreme distance—of being far away ; and falling under its influence I came to realise the utter isolation of this dwelling, lost in this

Arab town, separated by long leagues and weary marches from the world of men that lay beyond.

A bat zig-zagged its eccentric flight above our heads. The level rays of the sun rested upon us. From the canopy of palm-leaves came the subdued twitter of birds. Yet another sound stole through the evening air—a discordant metallic noise, accompanied by a hoarse murmur as of many voices raised in prayer. It came to the ears faintly, whispering over twilight spaces with a gentle yet irresistible impulse that carried one along with it like the swell of a dying wave.

“It comes from the great Mosque,” said Athman in an undertone.

His tone expressed devotion. The last rays of the sun fell upon him. His dark eyes, reflecting the dying light, shone with extraordinary fire. He flung out a hand that trembled with the intensity of his feelings.

“O Sidi !” he cried. “The world—the sun—life—how beautiful they all are ! Ah, but how beautiful ! They thrill me. They are a great poem ; and God who made them is the greatest poet in the universe. How true that is ! How true also that God is great.”

He was silent ; but as though in corroboration of his words, from the temple minaret through the rose-light that quivered in the radiant air came the long-drawn wailing cry :

“Al-l-a-h Ak-b-a-r ! Al-l-a-h Ak-b-a-r !”

Breathlessly we listened. Again and again the voice rose and fell. Solemnity weighed upon the

senses. The multitude of flat roofs upturned to the sky, the fringe of encircling palms, the mysterious line of desert, the imminent beauty of the African night, warm, scented, starlit—all were woven into a texture of indescribable loveliness, an Eastern embroidery, through which the voice wailing its eternal truths ran like a thread of living gold.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WHITE CAMEL.

THE camp of the Bedouins looked black in the sun. The low tents pitched on the sand without the walls of Tougourt were arranged with no eye to symmetry, but haphazard as pleased their dusky owners. In the middle of the *douar* rose a tent that attracted the eye, not only on account of its superior size, but also because of its unusual colour—scarlet, striped with black. In the midst of so much that was dun and monotonous the brightness of this one home glowed like a sunlit flower. The ground in the immediate vicinity of the camp bore indelible traces of Arab life. It was brown, beaten hard, filthy ; stripped of all desert plants, covered with refuse, bones, and dirt indescribable. Over the débris of bygone repasts crawled myriads of flies. Beside each tent a blackened spot composed of three stones marked the fireplace of the occupant. Chained to the low doorways were dogs—the yellow, ferocious, pale-eyed dogs of the Sahara. From time to time one of them sprang to his feet, ran to and fro, snapped at the thin desert wind, and made the air hideous with his barking. At a

little distance, where the sandy soil rose to a gentle elevation, were many camels. Some lay prostrate, their long necks stretched on the ground; others formed picturesque groups, their legs folded beneath them, their heads carried high, meditatively chewing the cud; while yet others stood erect in stiff, dejected attitudes, motionless as the shadows at their feet. Overhead the fierce sun blazed in the cloudless sky.

Athman and I stood where the sand sloped to the encampment. At our backs lay the brown flat-roofed city—an expanse of strong lights and deep, impenetrable shadows.

“It is the camp of the Ouled Nails—the dancing-girls,” murmured Athman dreamily. “They wait until the season is over at Tougourt, and then they pass away like shadows at noonday. Yes, they go far South and West, even to Djelfa, the home of the tribe.”

“Do the girls sleep *there*?” I gazed wonderingly at the dirt and disorder of the camp.

“No, Sidi, they sleep in the court, quite near to the *Grand Café Arabe*. Each one has a little room. I have seen them. They are very comfortable, and then it is without doubt more convenient for the dance.”

“A strange life, Athman.”

“What would you have, Sidi? It cannot be happy, that is true; but I suppose one becomes accustomed to it. They cannot help themselves. It is fate. The Prophet of God—blessed for ever be His name—has written in His Holy Book that this tribe, the

Ouled Naïls, are to be for ever dancers among the Arabs."

"But," I argued, "they are not all of this tribe. I have heard of others—Negresses, and Kabyles, and Algerians, and also women from the far South, from the wild desert tribes in the Sahara."

Athman looked at the Bedouin tents and then at me ; then said gravely :

"The Sidi speaks true. I cannot deny it. Such women do much harm. Fatma was from Constantine—it was not necessary for her to dance. You see, I think always of my friend Hamed, who is dead. O Sidi ! if a woman who is not of the Ouled Naïls leaves her home, her parents, her tribe, to be a dancer, a curse, to show herself unveiled for money, to lure the eyes, to ruin men, to—to—Ah, *Mon Dieu !* I would have her put to death. Yes, without mercy—like a snake that crawls to kill."

He flung out an arm and shook a clenched fist at the row of sunlit tents.

A great lizard of a dull grey colour ran lightly over the sand. It ran in and out of the depressions caused by camels' feet. From under the door-flap of one of the nearer tents a woman watched us with furtive eyes. She was employed in working a hand-mill ; at a certain reiterated movement of her arm one of her bangles caught the light and gleamed—a point of insufferable fire. From afar off came the discordant bray of a donkey. A gasp of heat panted from the desert ; it died away ; rose again and again as though the sun and sand had

given birth to some thing of fiery life that breathed full upon us.

"It is too hot here." I drew a deep breath. "Let us seek the shadow of the streets."

We turned to retrace our steps. The sand winked in a myriad points of flame. The dazzled eyes peered between scarcely opened eyelids. One felt as though walking in an ocean of light and heat.

"Ha!" shouted Athman.

Before I had time to wonder at his sudden exclamation, he had started at a run with the evident intention of meeting a man who came leisurely in our direction. Reaching the newcomer, he enfolded him in his arms, imprinting at the same time a kiss on either cheek. Together they approached me, Athman talking volubly, his friend appearing to listen with indifference.

"Sidi," cried Athman, and a smiling pride was visible both in voice and manner. "Permit me to present to you, my dear friend Si-Abdelmoummen, interpreter of the *Bureau Arabe* at Tougourt."

Si-Abdelmoummen and I exchanged a handshake. He was a young man of perhaps twenty years of age, dressed with scrupulous neatness in a snow-white turban and haïk. His complexion, fair as that of an European, was dull-white, pale as ivory. Not the faintest suspicion of colour dyed his cheeks. His eyes held my attention. They were large and dark, shaded by long black lashes, full of dreamy light, of calm insolence, of Oriental superiority. And yet one felt that their indifference was but a mask, and that it wanted but a breath of

emotion, a spark of anger, a sting of jealousy, and these slumbering depths would leap into flame. For a moment his hand lay within mine, a limp, irresponsible thing, then withdrew itself in a gentle but decided manner, as though it were thankful to be again at liberty. I noticed that it was white and beautifully shaped. When he spoke it emphasised his words with languid gestures, mere suspicions of movement, abandoned on account of the futility of exertion.

"Enchanted," he murmured in French. His voice corresponded perfectly with his appearance. It was soft, lazy, and infinitely self-satisfied.

"He speaks French," whispered Athman. "Ah, but very well, I assure you. He likes to talk French. *Il trouve que c'est chic.*"

"We were talking of dancing-girls," I remarked, turning to the interpreter. He smiled faintly.

"Si-Abdelmoummen is a great authority on dancing-girls," said Athman in a voice of importance. "He knows them all. If you desire information, ask him."

The young Arab shrugged his shoulders with an exaggerated affectation of modesty. His pale face looked unnaturally white. He formed a singular contrast to Athman.

"Yes, I know them all," he said softly, his eyes fixed on the Bedouin camp. "If *Monsieur* desires, I will show him the *Grand Café Arabe*, where one finds the best dancing. Thou, too, must come, Alouï." He turned to Athman. "The season advances, unfortunately. Thou must not lose this

opportunity. In a short time the caravan of the Ouled Nails will start for Djelfa."

We thanked him, but without accepting his offer. The dance of the Arabs was already familiar to me ; I had no desire to renew acquaintance with it. Athman too was indifferent to its fascination.

For awhile the interpreter talked in a soft and languid voice, retailing the news of Tougourt. In spite of his lethargic disposition, he was conversant with all that went on within the old Arab town. Not a murder, nor a theft, but he knew of it down to its most insignificant details. Births, marriages, deaths—he had them all at his fingers' ends. Nor was he interested only in local gossip. He asked me many questions relating to my experiences, and expressed himself as pleased with my replies.

"Alouï," he said at length, addressing himself to Athman with a shade of unwonted enthusiasm, "didst thou hear of our fight with the Touaregs ?"

"No," cried Athman, in great excitement ; "tell us about it, my friend."

"'Tis as I say," continued Si-Abdelmoummen ; "a band of Touaregs attacked a caravan between this and Ouargla, not far from Témaçin. We collected the 'goum' (Arab horsemen) and rode to meet them. As usual they had disappeared—our horses, alas ! are not so fast as their white racing camels. We then made an ambush, and sent some one to tell them that a caravan was on the point of leaving Tougourt. They fell into the trap. Ho ! ho ! We took them by surprise and killed fourteen.

There were five prisoners, but they all died on our saddle-bows before we got home. It was a good fight—the sand was red when we had finished. Yes, I enjoyed myself,” and Si-Abdelmoummen passed his tongue daintily across his lips.

“ You found no spoil ? ” inquired Athman.

“ Very little ; it had been sent South ; but we captured a camel—a true racing camel, such as only the Touaregs breed—the rest escaped.”

“ Where is it ? ” cried Athman.

“ I will show thee,” and the interpreter led the way up the sandy incline to the city gates.

“ There ! ” he cried, pointing to where the high mud wall cast a blue shadow on the sand. “ There is the animal.”

A recumbent mass struggled into animation. It was, as the Arab had informed us, much whiter than the generality of camels ; its whole appearance bespoke breeding and the nervous slenderness of limb that makes for speed. A hobble was attached to its right fore-leg. With dark malevolent eyes it watched us. Around it lay trodden dust and loose stones immersed in a shadow blue and deep as untroubled water. Above the crumbling parapet fringed with grasses stretched the cloudless sky.

“ He belongs to me,” said the interpreter ; “ I bought him from one of our men.”

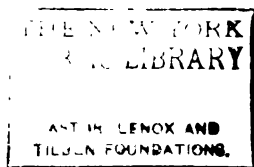
The animal's upper lip curled in an unmistakable sneer. On its three available legs it strove to increase the distance that separated it from us. The awkward limping movements inspired pity.

“ Is it fast ? ” I questioned.



A true racing camel.

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"As the wind," replied its master. "*Il faut voir ça*. Alouï Ben Salah, canst thou ride?"

"I will show thee," cried Athman eagerly.

In a moment the hobble was removed; the animal, snarling hoarsely, was brought to its knees, and Athman sprang to the hump. An upward lurch, a dig from his heels, and they were away, speeding through the sunlight.

"He rides well," murmured Si-Abdelmoummen in soft-voiced condescension. "*Un brave garçon*; a true poet; but"—he shrugged his shoulders—"a little simple, shall we say? Not a man of the world? Oh, no!"

I paid no attention to his words. My eyes were fixed on the racing figure. The camel shone white in the sun. Athman's fez glowed, his burnous floated behind him. One could imagine how the wind was whistling in his ears—how the desert was racing to meet him. They wheeled far off, then came speeding back to where we were standing. The animal's feet skimmed the ground with a springy celerity that told a tale of speed. The great white body was plainly a mass of taut muscles, instinct with tireless elasticity. On such a steed one could vanquish space, defy pursuit.

They reached us—man and camel all breathless with the speed of their flight.

Never shall I forget Athman as he appeared at that moment. He made a picture that stamped itself indelibly on my mind—one that returns to me often, now that he has passed for ever from my life.

Beyond him the blue sky quivered with light;

the desert lay becalmed, luminous as a sunlit sea ; far off, dim spaces lured the eyes farther and ever farther into an infinity of golden mystery. His surroundings might well have been stolen from dreamland, so tremblingly did they waver in the radiant air ; but he stood forth, a joyous reality, a being instinct with life, and health, and happiness.

His face shone with satisfaction ; his teeth gleamed as he drew in his breath ; his fine figure, poised on the lofty saddle, looked magnificently statuesque draped in the burnous-folds.

I congratulated him on his performance. He patted the camel's neck and laughed aloud, pleased as a boy with my praise. Listening to him it seemed to me as if I gave ear to the glad Spirit of Nature—as if all the joyous influences that laugh in the sunlight became audible in his merriment.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LIFE AT TOUGOURT.

DAY after day passed pleasantly at Tougourt. Time flowed in a placid uneventful stream, bearing us farther and ever farther away from old landmarks—familiarising us gently with the novelty of our surroundings. In time men ceased to wonder at my presence ; a few even condescended to greet me. The neighbours, it is true, held out no hand of friendship. Often did I speculate as to who they might be. But try as I might, I failed to penetrate within the pale of Oriental seclusion. A figure would hasten across the adjoining courtyard ; a voice would break the silence unexpectedly ; a faint column of smoke would rise at evening above our ruined wall—these were the only indications of life. All else was shrouded in mystery. Jealously did the flat-roofed dwellings guard their secrets, each behind encompassing walls, silent and impassive as their occupants.

Little by little the atmosphere of the South—the wonderful radiant atmosphere steeped in burning suns and starlit nights—took me to itself.

And, more than all, the purely physical influences of the land weighed upon my senses. The

somnolent air of the place gave birth to a languor that was far from being unpleasant. I came at last to understand, and even to sympathise with the listless habits of the Arabs ; how in the absence of any rousing call upon their activities they were content to lie asleep within the shadow of a wall, or to gaze for hours at a glimpse of luminous sky.

So powerful was this spell that even Athman succumbed. During the hush of noon when the world was lapped in slumber, I would find him stretched motionless on the sun-baked soil—a handkerchief covering his face to protect it from the flies.

Embareck and he were excellent friends. Their duties were light ; indeed, with the exception of preparing my meals which were modest both in quantity and quality, my companions did but little house-work. Both were inimitable story-tellers. Often of an evening, when the courtyard flickered in firelight and the great palm watched us from the darkness overhead, they would vie with each other as to which could tell the better tale. Then would story follow story till the night grew old, and sleep beckoned to us from the darkened rooms.

Stretched on the warm ground within the circle of firelight I listened to them—dreaming. Their words laid insistent hands on the imagination, transporting it at once to other scenes and other times. When they fell silent the present rushed back. The crown of palm-leaves—a moving darkness set with stars—whispered of my surroundings. With a thrill of almost incredulous delight I remembered that I was a householder in an old Arab town ;

that for the moment I too possessed a little part of an oasis lying far out in the Sahara.

Athman had many friends at Tougourt. To one and all he proudly introduced me, enlarging—with scant respect for truth—upon my importance in, the world beyond the desert. Whether his amiable fictions met with the suspicion they deserved I cannot tell, the perfect manners of his listeners concealing any feeling of incredulity behind a mask of politeness. Together we paid visits of much ceremony not only to those in high places, but also to those whom the prophet had called to shine in less elevated positions. Thus in time the list of my acquaintances extended from the noble Si-Derradji Caïd of Tougourt, to Lahlali the blind coffee-seller of the Western market-place.

With all Athman was a favourite. Their manner of conveying this impression corresponded to a nicety with their social status—thus while the Caïd patronised Athman with a bland and lofty condescension, the coffee-seller listened to his remarks as though they were the utterances of the Prophet.

Nor was Athman's manner less imbued with the respect due to social distinctions. He was all things to all men. And yet it interested me to observe how beneath the ceremonial veneer of the Arab there lurked at all times the merry geniality of the negro ; how jest and laugh followed close upon the heels of decorum ; how with all the airs of dignity that he affected, he never quite lost the deeper and more prevailing characteristic, the naïve simplicity of childhood.

Many were the rambles that I enjoyed, accompanied by Athman ; wandering at will through crowded thoroughfares, and along silent and secluded lanes.

In the open of the market-place life was full of colour and animation. The great dusty space thronged with a restless crowd, littered with carpets, vegetables, merchandise, echoed to the babel of ceaseless cries. Caravans from the desert wound their leisurely way through the press ; donkeys—the miserable little donkeys of the East—stood in dejected droves, or escaping from their masters rolled in the deep dust. At the farther end lay a recess sacred to prayer. Near by ran a little stream necessary for the purification of the Faithful. Within this recess were to be seen figures prostrating themselves ; it was rarely empty, for even when the intolerable sunlight had chased those who bought and sold from the open market-place, someone would creep along the shadow side of the wall, and discarding sandals would begin to worship Allah. But it was in the arcades that formed three sides of this square that the social life of Tougourt had its being. Here it was that the Arabs met to drink coffee and discuss their affairs ; here they had their shops, and here, too, they received their friends. The cool narrow galleries, with their promise of shelter, were a grateful change from the glare without. At all hours, save at the dead season of the siesta, they were thronged with picturesque figures, barred with intruding sunbeams, murmurous with the buzz of many voices.



Thronged with picturesque figures.

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Like many another Oriental city, Tougourt is built upon one plan never lost sight of, that of increasing shade at the expense of space. Not only are many of the narrow streets roofed with canopies, but the majority burrow under buildings, converting themselves into subterranean passages, with here and there a shaft pierced skywards through which the sunlight falls. These passages are for the most part of extreme narrowness, paved with cobble-stones, tortuous, coming oftentimes to a sudden stop, barred by an unexpected wall.

The effect upon the mind when one penetrates deep within this labyrinth is unforgettable. The gloom is profound ; the stagnant air reeks with a medley of strange Oriental smells ; the feeling of insecurity is ever present, for the pits of blackness on either hand lie deep and may well conceal a lurking danger. Silence weighs upon one's senses—it is as though it were not safe to raise the voice above a whisper. The few wayfarers whom one meets pass noiselessly on naked feet—formless figures appearing unexpectedly—gliding one knows not whither.

A distant noise startles the ear—the vault-like nature of the passage and the deep pervading silence causing it to assume unnatural significance. Warily we listen. The click-click of hoofs striking the stones rings from beyond the sunlit shaft. It nears us. Of a sudden, in the diminishing perspective ahead, a man appears, mounted on a donkey. They pass from darkness into light, and from light again into darkness. The shaft of sunlight

is obscured. We are plunged into twilight. We see only broken outlines, snatches of encircling brightness, luminous wall and gleaming roadway visible around the Arab's form and between the donkey's legs. The clatter nears us. We flatten ourselves against the wall. Something brushes past. We hear the sound of breathing ; and once, twice, and again, the tiny hoofs strike fire from the stones. Little by little all becomes quiet. In the middle of the passage ahead the sunlight falls again in uninterrupted glory.

But if a single figure causes inconvenience, the effect of a caravan of camels can more easily be imagined than described. These poor animals have the greatest antipathy to towns. Accustomed to the desert, they fear the narrowing walls—the semi-obscurity of confined spaces, with their suggestion of danger and mystery. When forced to penetrate within the labyrinth of streets their consternation is pitiable. They moan, they growl, they roar. The leading animal, advancing timidly with outstretched neck and fear-distended eyes, stops, wavers, lies down. The caravan is thrown into inextricable confusion. The voices of the Arabs are heard loud above the laments of the camels. Raucous and piercing, they strike discordantly upon the ear. The narrow vaulted passage becomes a mass of struggling forms—a pandemonium of appalling sounds.

No less interesting is the occasional passage of a horseman. Summoned from his home in some secluded quarter of the city, the member of the

Arab "*goum*" passes along the lane with the velocity of a whirlwind. Bending low over his animal's neck—not seated, but standing in his clumsy Moorish stirrups, one hand resting on the pommel, the other grasping his gun—the warrior is upon you in the twinkling of an eye. You hear a shout and the deafening clatter of hoofs. You catch a momentary glimpse of his dark face and floating draperies. The horse fascinates you. You are conscious of the desperate straining muscles, the curbed neck—a desert thing snatching at speed. There is a rush of wind, and before you can breathe they are away, man and horse, into the sunlight of the "Sok."

But after all, these are exceptions. You may wander for days in the narrow streets without meeting either a caravan or a horseman. Donkeys and pedestrians, it is true, will pass you, but even they are few in number. Their advent but emphasises the surrounding desolation, that like the sea is parted by and closes silently after the passage of every voyager.

The South meets you at every turn—meets you with silence, with loneliness, with mystery; with blinding sun and sinister shadow. You thread the tortuous alleys with bated breath. You mark the voiceless dwellings, the air of antiquity, the atmosphere of decay. The South draws you gently to herself. You have passed into a land of enchantment—a land of slumber. You resign yourself to dreams.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MINARET.

SIDI HADJ ACHMET was, I think, the most interesting of my Tougourt acquaintances. Athman introduced me to him with much ceremony.

"He is the mueddin," whispered Athman, while we were waiting in the outer-court of the great Mosque anticipating an interview. "He calls the prayer. It is he whom we hear from our house. He is very holy. He has been to Mecca!—to Mecca!"

His voice betrayed his veneration for so sacred a journey. His dark eyes, fixed on the entrance to the inner-court, revealed the ardent current of his thoughts.

A door opened, and a young man dressed entirely in white made his appearance. Round his neck hung a chain of large black beads. His features were noble, cast in an æsthetic mould. His eyes were full of an extraordinary haunting sadness.

For a moment he paused in the doorway, a white figure harmonizing with the whiteness of his surroundings. Athman sprang to meet him; knelt at his feet, and reverentially kissed his hand. The young priest raised him with a murmur of protestations.

"Welcome, O Son of Salah," he said in low, soft tones as though ever mindful of the sanctity of our surroundings. "Welcome! It rejoiceth me to see thee again in Tougourt."

"Thy sainted father is well?" inquired Athman earnestly.

"He is well. Praise be to Allah."

When introduced, Sidi Hadj Achmet shook hands. His eyes rested on mine with an expression of dreaming indifference; again I was struck with their depth of liquid melancholy.

A subdued murmur of prayers stole from the Mosque. Many worshippers were to be seen kneeling on the white matting. The sunlight deluged the courts—the reverberation of light and heat from the white-washed walls pained the eyes.

Leaving our shoes behind us we followed our guide across the shadowy interior. The Great Hall of Prayer is upheld on three rows of lofty pillars. There is a pleasing simplicity in its construction and also in its almost entire absence of colour—a pure dull white, unbroken save for the grey of the Arabesque roof and the domed recess in which the high priest worships. The latter—the only bright object visible—being inlaid with beautiful tiles.

"Does he speak French?" I inquired of Athman, as Sidi Hadj Achmet paused to exchange a whispered remark with a worshipper. Athman was much shocked.

"No, no! how can you imagine it! He is far too holy."

"But, Athman, the priest_at——"

He raised a warning hand—our guide joined us, and I relapsed into silence.

I cannot overestimate the amount of my indebtedness to this new friend. Thanks to his kindness, I enjoyed free access, not only to the Mosque, but also to the minaret—a favour which to my mind called for far deeper gratitude. My memories of the minaret are all rose-tinted. My happiest hours in Tougourt were passed upon it. It rose from the southern angle of the outer court, a tall and graceful structure, piercing the blue. The door by which one entered it, barely five feet in height, was made of unpainted palm-wood, worn and worm-eaten. When the priest inserted the great iron key into the lock, the little door groaned aloud. Once within it the traveller was plunged in darkness. There were neither windows nor slits by which the light could enter. The eyes, accustomed to the glare without, were useless to combat the gloom within. The circular staircase wound upwards in a groping blackness; the outstretched hands steadied the climber against the invisible walls; the feet felt tentatively for the uneven steps. Encouraged by the shuffling sound of the priest's sandals and the rustle of his draperies preceding me in the darkness, I invariably mounted the steps in a frame of happy anticipation. I knew the pleasure that awaited me at the top. As we toiled upwards, a grey light dawned overhead; brighter and brighter it grew, until at length, with a flood of radiance, the little tower suspended in sunshine welcomed us to itself.

What pleasurable hours I spent there ! Every phase of the day, from sunrise to sunset, became familiar to me, seen from my aerial station. At first I had to overcome a gentle and passive opposition. The word is too harsh to express the shade of solicitude that haunted the young priest's mind ; and yet, I know not what other I well can use. The truth is, Sidi Hadj Achmet was loth to leave me alone. He feared I know not what vague sacrilege to his minaret. It was his pulpit. He loved it. Not a detail in the tiny structure but awoke in him feelings of affectionate admiration. The horse-shoe arches framing the world—the roof that shaded him at noonday from the vertical sun ; the bell with the discordant voice, made—as he proudly informed me—by his father's own hands—all were to him companions in solitude, memories reaching far back into the past. The view too pleased him. He took pride in it, not because he personally cared for scenery, but because the praise lavished upon it by travellers had raised it in his estimation.

Gradually this opposition diminished. It pleases me to think that he came in time to realise that I too loved the minaret, with its train of solemn associations and all the world-beautiful slumbering at its feet. Be that as it may, his manner lost its uneasiness, until at length he left me alone with but occasional supervision to satisfy himself that all was well.

Gentle young priest ! Often would I look up to find him standing by my side, a white and

motionless figure gazing with introspective eyes at the dreaming tower ; his hands alone active—the thin brown fingers for ever telling the beads that hung around his neck—linking time to eternity with a chain of prayer.

But his life was not all passed in reverie. His duties as Mueddin called for punctual observance. When the hour drew near for the call to prayer Sidi Hadj Achmet roused himself from dreams—or, were he absent, I would hear his returning step, soft on the worn staircase. As he came up, I went down—not far, but to a little room built into the thickness of the wall. He did not ask me to retire—his manners were too courteous for that—but I instinctively felt that he would prefer me to do so. We passed each other without a word, forcing ourselves to occupy little space, for the staircase was of the narrowest.

Sometimes, before entering the darkness, I would look back. The young priest stood invariably facing the East, his hands grasping the parapet edge. The sunlight would be playing over his draperies, forcing them to shine white against the deep blue of the sky. At such moments I never could see his face, but every line of his figure was eloquent. His attitude bespoke intense earnestness—an awakening from the sloth of habitual lethargy to the fire of passionate religious enthusiasm.

The little room within the wall was but a cell used by Sidi Hadj Achmet as a bed-chamber. It possessed a door, but no window. A dim twilight reigned within it, what light it had being forced

to find its downward way round circular turnings. The white palm-leaf matting that covered the floor felt scrupulously clean. It exhaled a faint odour of musk that awoke within me feelings of unusual solemnity. I felt as though I had been immured for ages within this temple wall, as though the spices used long ago when I had been embalmed lived still within my nostrils ; as though, for me, the world of kindly human life had passed away for ever.

Entangled in fancies I lay in the darkness. All at once a cry broke the silence. Tremulous and faint, then swelling in full sonorous volume, penetrating, long-drawn out, wailing down the gloomy staircase, setting the echoes sobbing, losing itself in the blackness of the turnings. A sound full of mystery and fascination. And yet there was something ennobling in it, something that cried aloud of a faith immovable as the mountains, inexorable even as death. I listened, breathless. Heard thus in the darkness, entombed within the wall, the effect was solemn beyond belief. It seemed to me that every stone was lifting up its voice—that the aged Mosque was proclaiming to the world the greatness and majesty of its God.

The memory of those vigils is ineffaceable within my mind. I have but to think of them and I am again there—in my lonely watch-tower—drinking in the wonderful view as if I never could drink my fill. One such visit returns to me now——

It is morning—the sun has just risen. Below me lies the town, its roofs aflush with early light. At this hour everything is bathed in rose-colour.

Tougourt is a sparkle of isolated lights shining like stars against a dreaming depth of shadow. The domes of three marabouts' tombs—one pale pink, two dazzling white—glitter brightly. In the distance the desert, during its one hour of freshness, appears to smile at the rising sun. In the market-place far below, animation is at its height. Sounds of life steal upwards, softened and rendered melancholy by the distance. I see Arabs coming and going, numerous and insignificant as ants. A caravan of camels winds its leisurely way through the crowd. One by one the animals disappear within the gates of a Fondouk; the noise of their roaring comes faintly to the ear. Little donkeys plod to and fro, laden with market produce, stirring the dust with their tiny hoofs. A tall palm grows in the middle of an open space. It stands alone; the other palms are massed in the shimmering background. Around this solitary tree the vortex of Arab life eddies ceaselessly. Through the radiant air I can distinguish countless figures squatting in rows, passing and repassing, buying, selling, chatting, gesticulating. The myriad burnouses are of a shade with the grey dust. Here and there the monotony is relieved by splashes of colour. The vivid green of freshly-cut barley—the dark-red cloaks of the *Bureau Arabe*—the blur of hues quivering over a heap of Oriental carpets—the orange of a girl's caftan as she flits past in the sun—the blue uniform and red fez of a *Tirailleur*—all mix and mingle, isolated yet indivisible as are the broken lights in a kaleidoscope.



The flat roofs are all deserted.

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TILDEN FOUNDATIONS

I stand leaning upon the stone parapet, gazing through the little horse-shoe arch that faces the South. My eyes are dazzled by the marvellous flood of light. And not my eyes only, but my whole being is saturated in the inexpressible radiance. Hot exhalations are wafted up to me ; they come in gasps from the burning sands. Little by little the scene loses its rose-coloured light, it becomes wan and lifeless ; the distant sand-hills alone retain for a space the rose-flush of the dawn.

As the sun approaches the zenith, animation sinks like one suffering from exhaustion. Bright colours disappear. Men disperse slowly--I lose them in the gloom of the streets. Gradually the shadow of my minaret decreases till it is but a patch of insignificant blue. The murmur of prayers from the great Mosque below faints--then dies away. Around me, in my little aerial station, the silence is unbroken--save at times when the wood-work of the tower creaks unexpectedly in the heat. The flat roofs are all deserted. Upon them I can see a wonderful medley of palm-branches ; of little rose-coloured apricots ; of brown sun-dried dates. The windows facing the inner courts appear but as holes pierced into blackness. Along the summit of each wall there trembles a line of fire, wavering as though a breath could blow it out. The very dogs are silent--I can see one, an inert yellow mass, lying in the deep shadow of a door.

For four hours Tougourt sleeps below me drugged with draughts of sunlight, sunk in a heavy lethargic slumber, in a sleep so lifeless that one fears it may

pass insensibly into death. For four long hours I am safe from interruption. No one will come. The Sidi Hadj Achmet is asleep within his little windowless room. Athman will not visit me; he too is asleep—somewhere—in the shadow of a wall.

I stand watching—dreaming. Nothing moves. Far and near silence and slumber hold the world. Light alone is alive, exulting in a fierce, passionate, self-centred existence. And still I watch and wonder, expecting something to happen—something to move. But no, all is over. The morning is finished. The one hour of freshness, of delicate air is dead. Wrapped in her flame-mantle Tougourt resigns herself to the day-long tyranny of the sun.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WE VISIT THE CAFÉ.

NIGHT had come, bringing with it, however, but little relief from the torpor of the day. Tougourt lay submerged in an ocean of heat, warm as a tropical sea. The sultry atmosphere flooded the darkness; when one moved, one became conscious of its presence impeding activity like deep water. No sound came from the palms that overshadowed the court. Overhead the stars shone—I marvelled at their splendour. It was one of those intoxicating nights full of glamour and mystery, stirred to its purple depths by a strange unrest—bringing darkness, but not sleep, upon its wings. An extraordinary silence had fallen upon the town—a silence deep as that of mid-day, but far more impressive.

I stood at my open window. An imperative desire for air had come upon me, but the outer atmosphere was fully as stagnant as that within the room. The dark buildings grouped themselves before my eyes. Between the open portals of the gate the white lane showed faintly. The roofs of the opposite houses cut the sky with a hard

black line. My thoughts soared above and beyond into the trackless infinities of space. Beneath them, where the world curved to the South, lay the desert.

A step on the mud floor, and Athman stood beside me.

"You cannot sleep, Sidi?"

"No, Athman. And you?"

"I am restless, Sidi. I have been writing a poem, but I could not finish it—the words would not come. And then, you see, the true poem is this night."

A faint odour of orange-blossom floated past. It seemed to press light fingers upon the keys of sensation; under its gentle touch the beauty of the night gave forth fresh harmonies.

"What time is it?" I inquired.

Athman peered into the face of his silver watch, a present from his English friend.

"I think it is nearly eleven," he answered.

"But it is so dark I may be wrong. Sidi, shall we go out? We have need of air. One stifles in this house to-night. Let us walk. Embareck will stay to see that all is well."

I assented. Together we sought the benighted streets. Nothing stirred. A dog devouring garbage was the one touch of animation. The blackness of some of the narrow passages was fearsome. We were forced to walk the one behind the other. Athman led the way, while I followed him closely, my one fear being that I might lose him in the obscurity. Neither of us spoke. Nothing was to be heard save

the sound of our footsteps muffled by the dust. The desolation of these sinister alleys affected the spirits. There they lay under the Southern stars—lost in the gloom of this Arab town—silent as the dead—sad as with the sadness of things long gone by.

Traversing the market-place, we plunged into the labyrinth that lay beyond. No definite plan directed our steps.

Insensibly the road which we were following began to ascend; it also widened, and I felt that the dust, but a moment ago beneath our feet, had given place to sand deep and soft as that which lay beyond. It was the desert invading the town. Upwards we toiled—wading ankle-deep. The dead hush was broken only by the sound of our breathing. The Spirit of Solitude that dwelt in the Infinite had taken possession of this lonely suburb, filling it with the mystery of the unknown.

Suddenly Athman stopped. I felt his hand upon my arm.

“Listen!” he whispered.

We stood still. Through the hot and stagnant air came the far-off howling of a dog. The sound was one of inconceivable melancholy.

“It is nothing,” I said in a low voice. “Why did you stop? Let us go on.”

Athman did not move—his hand still rested on my arm.

“Hu-s-h,” he whispered again. “It was something. I thought I heard—— Yes, there it is again. Do you hear?”

The howl had died away. But another sound rose in the silence. Far off, barbaric, intermittent—the sound of Arab music.

“It is the music of the dancing-girls—the Ouled Nails,” continued Athman. “Their café must be on the top of this hill. I had forgotten that it was in this quarter. Let us go back, Sidi. It grows late.”

Again the strange sound reached us. It stirred the heavy darkness as though it were a sigh from the desert.

“Stop!” I cried, for Athman had begun to move down-hill. “Now that we are so near, we might as well see this dance. Come.”

He allowed himself to be persuaded. Slowly we continued to ascend. The music increased in volume—the shrill sound of an Arab flute and the muffled beating of tom-toms came to the listening ear. The night was strangely moved.

Soon a wall higher than its immediate neighbours rose into sight. At its outermost corner a camel's skull, built into the highest mud bricks, gleamed in the starlight. Placed there long ago to avert the evil eye, it grinned a white and ghastly grin upon all who approached the dancing-girls. From an open doorway within the wall a flood of yellow light fell upon the road. Around this entrance were many Arabs gazing over each other's shoulders at the sight within. The light splashed their forms with weird effect; while behind them, on the heaps of desert sand, fell their long fantastic shadows. High and shrill screamed the flute in

rapid, breathless movements, like a dancer keeping time to the beating of the drums. Pushing our way through the crowd of bystanders we entered the building. As we crossed the threshold, the music ceased. The sudden cessation of sound struck me as premeditated—as if something had been accomplished—as if the voice that had enticed us out of the darkness having achieved its object had no further need of exertion.

The room in which we found ourselves was of considerable size, with domed ceiling supported on either side by a row of arches forming a double arcade. Its walls were dirty white, scrawled over apparently with charcoal. The floor was of mud. At intervals along the wall, at a height of some six to seven feet from the ground, torches of resinous wood fastened to brackets cast a strong but wavering light over the interior. At the further end of the hall a dais covered with a red carpet extended from pillar to pillar. In front of this low stage were seated the musicians. These consisted of four performers on the tom-tom, and one on the flute—the latter a negro of colossal proportions, with a savage, bestial appearance that accorded well with his costume of leopard-skin hung about with ropes of cowrie-beads. All were overcome with the heat. The negro mopped his shining face with an ill-tempered air.

Behind the musicians, a number of women were seated on a bench placed against the wall. It did not need Athman's whispered information to tell me that these were the women of the Ouled Nails,

the dancing girls of the Arabs. I looked at them with an interest that passed swiftly to disappointment. In spite of the picturesqueness of their costumes—bright colours and a profusion of strange barbaric ornaments—their vulgarity repelled. Two were conversing in undertones. One—a stout woman who had been dancing as we entered—was leaning against the wall in a breathless state, her prominent eyes fixed on vacancy, her fat hands pressed upon her heaving bosom. The majority however sat motionless, with the stolidity of wooden dolls, staring straight before them out of indifferent, kohl-encircled eyes.

The place was alive with Arabs, a moving mass of burnouses. They sat in rows upon the palm-leaf mats; they blocked the entrance; they surged between the arcades; they threatened to overflow the space reserved for the dancing, and were only prevented doing so by the angry remonstrances of the proprietor.

An inner door situated near to the daïs led apparently to a court beyond.

The atmosphere within the building was well-nigh insupportable. The night without had proved oppressive, but clean and uncontaminated; within, it was foul with the smoke from guttering torches, and with a pungent aromatic scent much affected by the women of the Ouled Nâils.

We elbowed our way towards the farther arcade. As we neared it, I recognised Athman's friend, Si-Abdelmoummen, the young Arab interpreter. Seated on a bench within the arcade, he was occu-

pied in sipping coffee. He welcomed us with languid courtesy. Gathering his draperies together with a white and dainty hand, he made room for us beside him.

"I am pleased to see thee," he murmured to my companion. No sign of pleasure however appeared within his velvety eyes. "I knew thou wouldst come. One must have distractions. It is hot to-night. Yes?" He wiped his pale face and turned again to his coffee.

"A dance is just over?" inquired Athman. He spoke indifferently. His eyes roving round the room rested upon the dancing-girls.

"Yes," responded his friend. "Yes," he continued, speaking softly and slowly, sipping his coffee after each disjointed sentence. "As thou sayest. A dance is over. Not interesting. No. Now we will see Mbarka. She is the most beautiful. Fair as a European. She comes from Constantine. My town, as thou knowest. I will present thee after the dance."

We witnessed the performance of Mbarka with no pleasure. The girl was undoubtedly pretty, but stout and ungraceful. Her dancing was full of vulgarity. One felt sorry that a woman should dance in this manner before these rows of hungry eyes.

The dance over, she waddled in our direction.

She stood before us breathless—a strange figure composed of paint and powder, of gold and silver, of gaudy draperies, of youth tarnished at its source, of womanhood that had long outlived a

blush. With black, kohl-encircled eyes she stared at us, giggled faintly, then held out her hand. Upon the invitation of Si-Abdelmoummen she seated herself beside us, and having accepted a cup of coffee and a cigarette, relapsed into a condition of placid enjoyment.

The young interpreter conversed in lazy tones, but neither Athman nor I listened to him. His remarks were for the most part addressed to the girl, for whom he betrayed a patronizing and blasé admiration. Her voice, occasionally raised in reply, sounded discordant.

Athman was unaffectedly bored. Leaning against the wall he yawned frequently, turning his head this way and that in a vain attempt to extract amusement from his surroundings.

My own feelings were similar to those of my guide. The crowded café with its objectionable atmosphere had ceased to interest me. My eyes sought the doorway, where above the crowd of intervening figures I could see the stars.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AĪSHA.

I HAD all but forgotten my surroundings when they snatched me back from dreamland by a strain of music. I started in amazement; yet there was no mistaking the sounds. It was the music of the Southern dancing-girls—the music that Athman loved. I listened, wondering. How often had I heard it—on the march—in the camp beneath the palms—in the night watches. It seemed strange to hear it in this café, played by other fingers, for I associated it with Athman, and had come to look upon it indeed as peculiarly his own.

His hand clutched my arm.

“Sidi!” he cried. “You hear! You hear! My music!”

His face shone with excitement; his eyes expressed wonder and pleasure. With his disengaged hand he kept time to the melody. I turned to the orchestra. The tom-tom players were still there, but the negro had given place to an old man. He was seated cross-legged on the daīs, a little in advance of the other musicians. He had the air

of a wizard. His turban and robes were black, and presented a striking contrast to his silvery hair and thin white beard. Age had set her seal on him in many wrinkles, in shrunken frame and toothless gums; but the fire of enthusiasm burned still within his eyes, deep-sunken though they were and overshadowed by eyebrows coarse and white as frosted thatch. His hands twitching on the stops of the flute resembled vultures' claws. It was plain to the least observant that his whole being lived and breathed in the music. At times he swayed violently in sudden jerks as though shaken by strong, invisible hands.

"*Mon Dieu!* it is he!" exclaimed Athman.

"Who?" I demanded; but even as I spoke, I remembered. This could be none other than the old man who had taught Athman the melody under the palms of Zaouiat Ribah, long ago—the old man whom he had fancied dead, because he had lost sight of him during the busy days at Biskra. How strange that they should meet here, at Tougourt, after the lapse of so many years. I was about to speak again when a woman appeared in the doorway, and in the interest which she created the words died upon my lips.

She stood framed between the palm-tree logs—motionless—the light of the torches flashing upon her; the starlight, seen above and beyond, encircling her head in a faint white radiance; then as the flute screamed a wild and imperious note of invitation, she moved slowly forward. The Arabs seated in dusky rows turned to watch her. Their

faces betrayed deep but dignified interest. Two chess players ceased their game. One of them pushed the board away with his naked toes, resettled his turban upon his head, and leaned against the wall. His eyes were semi-closed, but singularly alert; they resembled the eyes of a cat watching a mouse. A Spahis, seated on a bench at a little distance, paused in the act of raising his coffee cup to his lips, and drew his comrade's attention to her with a gesture.

One man alone spoke to her. He was standing within the shadow-margin of the door, but as she passed he stepped into the light, and I knew him for a Bedouin—a wild-looking figure clad in rags. In spite of the dissimilarity of costume there was that in the general characteristics of both man and woman that told of a common origin, and I found myself wondering if they were members of the same desert tribe.

As she passed he spoke to her rapidly, almost with ferocity. I caught the glitter of his teeth. She answered with a gesture, and of little moment, for her expression did not alter, neither did she pause. The man stood for a second motionless, petrified, gazing after her with the eyes of a dumb animal quivering under a blow. Then, tossing his arms above his head he slunk once more into shadow.

The old man seated on the daïs caught sight of her. His eyes glowed with extraordinary fire; his meagre body swayed violently; his music sprang to fresh life. A number of wild notes made themselves heard, cried out, screamed with insistent

clamour, passed and repassed as it were before our eyes ; now singly, now together ; uneasy, restless, hungering, impatient as caged animals waiting to be fed. The tom-toms throbbed in unison, monotonous and muffled, yet quick and breathless, as though the wild music had a heart whose beating could not be stilled by the passion in its voice.

The stir of expectation increased. It passed over the spectators as a gasp of desert wind passes over sultry sand. Conversation ceased ; coffee cups were set down, and two of the dancing-girls whose voices had been raised in altercation were admonished angrily by the negro-proprietor.

The woman paused at the far end of the hall, turned to the vacant space across which she had but that moment moved, and raised her arms above her head in the attitude of one who listens. Her appearance evaded description. Yet, though her wild dark beauty baffled words, it remained in the watcher's mind—an imperishable memory. One trait alone, more definite than the others, occurs to me now—gracefulness. Every movement told of physical perfection, of faultless balance, of beautiful limbs obedient to an unerring sense of rhythm. To watch her was a pleasure akin to watching wind-blown grass, or waves dancing in the sunlight. She wore many ornaments—her slender wrists and ankles were encircled with bands of massive silver. Upon her head there rested a small golden crown, and depending from her neck were chains of golden coins. Her costume was

savage in its lust for bright colours—in its scarlet, and green, and gold ; yet seen thus in the yellow light against the dusky background and surrounded on all sides by silent sheeted figures, it struck home to a sense of appropriateness. Not otherwise could one imagine her ; the effect was barbaric—but it was Africa.

The flute cried to her with angry impatience. She began to dance. Her movements were sinuous and slow ; the flexibility of her body was remarkable. The performance was full of beauty, yet it was a beauty that verged upon the uncanny. One felt as though this gliding, undulating figure were half-snake, half-woman, holding her audience spell-bound by the force of supernatural charms.

Her dancing differed wholly from that of the dancer who had preceded her. Here were no contortions, no jerking of the muscles, no posturing that offended the taste ; and yet in the very refinement of her attitudes lay danger—a danger more subtle in that it was more cunningly veiled than that of her companion. And yet with all her powers of seduction she was no free agent, for one saw clearly that she was thrall to the music. Like the aged musician, she too lived but in this song of the South—this soul of the sun made audible. It dominated her completely ; now sending her forth—now summoning her back—enmeshing her in melody—whispering to her in breathless notes—calling to her in low seductive tones irresponsible as the first echoes of desire.

Her naked feet passed inaudibly over the mud

floor. Her hands rivetted attention. They were small, with tapering fingers, the nails dyed bright red with henna. She held them before her at arms' length, on a level with her eyes. They were never at rest, but turned and twisted ceaselessly, almost as though they were the hands of a swimmer cleaving deep water. At times they trembled—the fingers opening and closing convulsively; and again becoming rigid they resumed their former monotonous movements. The dancer followed them with the air of one walking in her sleep, or like one blinded by excess of light. Her face heightened the illusion. The eyes were open but were Sphinx-like in their arrested expression: the features composed, the mouth quiet. It was impossible to tell her thoughts.

While she danced, the café was very still. The Arabs sat like dead men save for the gleaming of their eyes. The place was animated only by the lights, the music, and the dreaming figure that came and went silent as the shadow at its feet.

A sudden movement at my side drew my attention to Athman. He was leaning forward, his clasped hands pinned between his knees. The torchlight fell upon his face. It was strangely moved. His lips, slightly parted, revealed the glitter of white teeth. His eyes followed the dancer's every movement with an expression that was half wonder, half fear, yet wholly fascination. Every line of his body bespoke tense absorbing interest. He sat like a man under a spell. One would say that he had ceased to breathe.

Our companions conversed, but he heard them not.

"By the Prophet, she dances well," murmured Si-Abdelmoummen languidly.

"Ugh!" grunted Mbarka, sucking at her cigarette; her voice grated on the ear like the cry of an angry jay. "Ugh! call you that well? That is no dancing. A child could do better. Now I——"

"Silence!" cried a voice, and a stout Arab seated near a pillar turned a reproving face in our direction. Mbarka grunted again, tossed her head in defiance, then bidding us an ostentatious farewell, waddled through the inner doorway. Again I turned to the dancer.

The music had undergone a change—more than ever before it breathed of sunlit space, of freedom, of wandering lives, of the love of desert winds and desert suns—the indelible birthmark—seared deep within the heart of desert children. And as the music beat its invisible wings against the doors of imagination there dawned within the listener's mind the possibility of understanding all—of becoming one for a time with the soul of mystery, of loneliness, and of light that lies far within the heart of the African sun.

The dancer responded to the change. Her movements became languid. Her hands, held ever at arms' length, yearned towards this mirage of sound. Her naked feet essayed to follow. Her eyes were fixed on the mud and plaster walls, but she did not see them. She gazed beyond. For her this café, with its sordid entertainment, its

guttering lights, its atmosphere of unwashed humanity, was as though it were not. Her eyes—her wonderful dark eyes, kohl-encircled, inscrutable, wells of sultry light, depths of dreaming shadow—rested on something which we could not see, which we could only surmise to be one with the music ; something far off, lost in the great quiet night that hemmed us in with its silence and its stars.

And as the eyes followed her, one idea—vague, elusive, yet becoming every moment clearer, more insistent—grew within the watcher's mind. *The Desert !* Aye, that was it. This woman was the personification of the desert. Her dance was its mystery made visible. She suggested to the imagination all that one loved and feared in its illimitable spaces. In her one realised the existence of the same beauty, the same impassivity, the same sinister possibilities.

Abruptly the music ceased. A wave of relaxed attention, as of a taut bow-string suddenly released, passed over the café. The Arabs resettled themselves in postures of greater ease ; some called for coffee, some resumed interrupted conversations, and the two chess players turned again to their game. From the dancing-girls' bench came the sound of giggling—a shrill inane noise. The old musician seated on the dais stared round him with wide, unseeing eyes. He had the helpless air of one snatched suddenly from dreamland. All at once he sprang to his feet, hobbled rapidly towards the door, and disappeared into the moonlight of the court. The voice of the negro made itself heard

above the buzz of conversation ; its tones were angry and loud. He was apparently scolding a servant. The light splashed the ugly walls with great goutts of uncertain colour. It gave birth to a yellow haze, through which the café and its crowd of occupants wavered like the world in a drunkard's eye. The atmosphere reeked with the fumes of torches and the foetid odour of perspiration, mingling with the subtle scent of musk that carried the imagination captive with its suggestions of far-off lands.

" How like you Aïsha ? " inquired the soft languid voice of Si-Adbelmoummen. I turned to him. He had addressed the question to Athman.

" Aïsha ! " said my guide. He spoke in a wondering whisper. Between his lips the southern name sounded soft as a caress. His eyes were still riveted on the dancer who had now begun to collect money from the Arabs.

" But certainly," continued his friend, still speaking in the French language, " she is a novelty. I have seen many dancers as thou knowest, but never one like her. She has not been here long. They tell me she comes from far south—from the great Sahara. No one knows whence she comes, or what is the name of her tribe. She came here unexpectedly one night with a caravan of Bedouins, accompanied by an old man. But did you say you liked her ? "

Athman muttered something under his breath. I did not catch the words, but his tone sounded full of suppressed impatience, as though he were

annoyed with this soft, self-satisfied voice for breaking the engrossing current of his thoughts.

The dancer came nearer. Already several pieces of silver adhered to her forehead—attached thereto, as is the Arab custom, by the saliva of the donors. The white metal glittered like stars against the warm brown of her skin. Her movements were still suggestive of the gliding sinuosities of a snake, or the stealthy grace of a panther. As she walked she swayed slightly from the hips. An air of voluptuous indolence surrounded her like an atmosphere. The long chains of golden coins depending from her neck swung to her every movement. The crown surmounting her black hair flashed in the torch-light ; it gave her a regal appearance, as though she were some desert queen exacting tribute from her subjects. Against the dirty plaster of the walls and the nondescript greys of the Arabs, her bright costume glowed like a tropical flower—a thing of hot colour and intoxicating perfume.

She reached Athman. Slowly she bent her head and looked him full in the eyes. With a hand that trembled visibly my guide added his offering to those already attached to her forehead.

Her face held me breathless. The music-spell had fallen from it like a discarded mask, and had given place to an alert appraising vigilance that caused her eyes to gleam bright yet hard as sunlit steel.

It was difficult to judge this desert woman dispassionately. Her beauty and marvellous grace unconsciously influenced the mind in her favour.

Yet as I looked into her face, admiration gave place to a feeling that was almost aversion, vague, uneasy, unaccountable, caused perchance by the utter callousness of her expression and the absence of all the softer qualities that make for feminine charm.

We sat silent, watching her as she glided between the rows of Arabs. The scarlet and gold of her draperies receded into the yellow haze—paused an instant where the torchlight fell upon the vacant space by the doorway, then passed out into the night.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE EMPTY COURTYARD.

My eyes turned to Athman. For a moment he sat without moving, then with a jerk he roused himself, passed a hand across his eyes, rose to his feet, and made for the inner door through which the dancer had disappeared. His movements were rapid, yet mechanical. He looked neither to right nor left. An Arab whom he had inadvertently jostled, turned to watch his retreating figure with angry gesticulations. But Athman was oblivious to his rage ; he had even forgotten us. In another moment he too vanished into the night. I stared after him. A vague uneasiness troubled me. All at once a soft laugh recalled my companion. I turned to him. Si-Abdelmoummen's face was indicative of a languid amusement.

"My friend appears to be interested in Aïsha." His tone verged on the contemptuous—it was almost a sneer. "It is amusing. He gave himself too many airs, *ce pauvre Aloui*. He would not even speak to dancing-girls—and now, you see ! He ! he ! he ! I will banter him. Oh, I will show you !"

He broke off to converse with an acquaintance. Leaving him without apology, I followed Athman.

On reaching the inner court, I stood irresolute in the doorway. Before me the one-storied building formed a square. Upon the flat roofs the palanquins bereft of covering showed meagre as skeletons. Between their ribs the stars shone. The open space was neither dark nor light, but full of a mysterious uncertainty. Across it passed shadowy figures, and through the sultry air came the sound of subdued voices. I took a few steps forward. A man stood in the middle of the courtyard. There was that in his attitude that struck me as singular. The phantomlike forms passed him; one even accosted him, but he did not move. I approached noiselessly, and by the faint light of the stars I recognised Athman. He was unconscious of my presence. With head bent forward he continued to stare around him as though the eager attitude would assist him in overcoming the obscurity. I laid a hand on his arm.

"Athman," I said.

He started violently.

"Athman, let us go home."

"No," he cried. I could not see his expression, but his passionate gesture of dissent spoke volumes.

"It grows late," I remonstrated. "The dancing is finished for the night. Soon everyone will have gone. See, they are putting out the lights."

He peered into the surrounding gloom. I thought he had not heard me, but all at once he spoke.

"I cannot find her," he muttered; "she came out by this door. She must be here. She passed this way, but I was too late, *Mon Dieu!* too late!"

A passionate disappointment wailed in his words. He shook off my hand with a sudden, impatient movement as though my touch caused him irritation. For the moment I made no answer. I was taken aback. It was all so unforeseen. The utter futility of words struck me forcibly. Words could not undo that which had happened. Athman's voice as he stood there searching in the starlight, carried conviction; it no more lent itself to misunderstanding than did the molten lava in a volcano. I recalled the light words of Si-Abdelmoummen, and smiled grimly. He would be a rash man who would dare to banter now.

We stood silent, each engrossed in his thoughts. A woman passed us with a weary step; she came from the café at our backs. Athman sprang forward. I heard the harsh laugh of Mbarka. They conversed in undertones; then slowly and as if against his will Athman rejoined me. When he spoke, his words came disjointedly like the speech of one whose thoughts are threshing out some matter of great importance.

"She has gone away—with the old musician—to the camp in the desert."

"What camp?"

"The Bedouin camp, beyond the walls."

"Does she sleep there?"

"To-night, yes. She has a room here. But Mbarka says that she loves best to sleep in a tent."

He paused, then added in a soft undertone, "I understand that."

"Let us go home, Athman."

"To the house? It—it is so far. It will be hot there to-night. Sidi——" He hesitated, and in spite of the darkness I saw him move restlessly from one foot to another. "If—if we should walk a little towards the desert?"

I shook my head.

"I am tired. I wish to go back. I doubt if I can find my way home alone, Athman."

In an instant he was all self-reproach.

"O Sidi, I am sorry. I who owe you so much. Forgive me. I am ungrateful—I should be so glad that I have met her at last—at last. Ah, *Mon Dieu!* Come, Sidi; let us go home."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

UNREST.

I AWOKE upon the following morning with a vague feeling that something of unusual significance had taken place. But that moment set free from the thralldom of sleep, I could not at once recall the events of the preceding night ; as I lay thinking, however, with eyes fixed on the curtain that stirred slightly in the doorway, the past swept back and Athman's name sprung to my lips.

The sun, well above the horizon, sent a shaft of light in at the open window. With it entered an impression of freshness that was welcome ; of purity also and that young gaiety of light associated with the childhood of day, which makes us feel that although we grow old, yet the world is always young. The twittering of birds met the ear—it came from the branches of my palm-tree.

With a start I realised that it was later than usual for my morning cup of coffee. Again my thoughts reverted to Athman. I wondered why he had forgotten me ; never before had he failed in this duty ; indeed, so accustomed had I become to being awakened—or at all events, greeted—at sunrise by his “fresh morning face,” that the

advent of a new day unaccompanied by him struck me as an unnatural phenomenon.

Gradually the events of the past night marshalled themselves before me. The café, the music, the dancer, they passed pale as a procession of phantoms. As I lay there semi-dreaming they appeared to have been drained of their reality by the darkness—and not only of their reality but also of their potency for harm. Even their effect upon Athman—remembered but as an evil dream—appeared to have lost much of its momentous character. Despite the recollection of his agitation, of his search for the dancer, and our silent return in the starlight, I smiled as I murmured to myself: “He is only a boy after all. A sound sleep will have disillusioned him. In a moment I shall hear his step upon the stair and we will laugh together over the whole affair.”

But the moments passed and the silence remained unbroken.

Weary of inaction I leaped at last from my bed and ran to the balcony that overlooked the court. I leaned over it and searched the open space. Sunshine fell upon me, but across the white dust below the shadows lay undisturbed. Seated where the palm-tree sprang from the beaten mud was Embareck. He was engaged in polishing his long Arab gun—an endless and engrossing occupation. With closed lips he hummed the air with which he was accustomed to while away the hours in the desert; it sounded thin, nasal, monotonous, and yet sad. Of my guide there was no sign.

"Athman!" I called. "Athman!"

Embareck looked up. His one eye surveyed me steadily; with his shoulder he twitched his immense hat to its usual position behind his back. A butterfly flitted over the ruined wall; from far off came the sound of a camel's roar.

"Where is Athman?" I questioned.

The hunter spread out his hands.

"Is he in the house?"

"No, most noble Sidi."

"Has he gone to the market?"

He shook his head.

"Then where is he?" I cried impatiently.

Embareck roused himself, and leaned his gun carefully against the stem of the palm-tree.

"Great Sidi, thy servant knoweth not whither he has gone. Of a surety sleep has not visited his eyelids. Last night after the Sidi ascended the stair, I heard the gate open softly. I looked into his room—he was no longer there. Without doubt he has gone on a long trail; I myself have spent many nights thus, without sleep, watching in the wide Sahara."

I listened to him, my mind full of serious thoughts. So—it *was* true. I had underestimated the events of the night and their effect on Athman. He was young—a poet—an Arab with hot negro blood in his veins; whither would love lead him? It had already driven him out of doors at midnight; it had swept all remembrance of his duties from his mind. Whither would it lead him?

The day proved oppressive. The heat increased

sensibly with every hour till the world throbbed. It passed over the city in semi-liquid waves through which the houses and distant oasis quivered like coals in a furnace.

An excursion which had been planned to Temacin had—owing to the absence of Athman—to be abandoned. No later than the previous morning had he enlarged in his naïve enthusiastic manner upon the beauty of the little oasis, and the extreme holiness of the Marabout to whom it belonged. We were to have started shortly after breakfast. The donkey drivers whom we had engaged arrived with their little animals, making a disquieting clatter in the silence. At first they were inclined to be troublesome fearing that we would not pay them; receiving a liberal gratuity however they cried their thanks to Allah, and little by little the noise of hoofs retreated into the distance.

I could settle neither to reading nor writing. A sense of unrest possessed me. Time and again I crossed the courtyard—now a blaze in the sun—and stood for long gazing down the lane. But although an occasional figure neared me, it gave me no pleasure; for I saw far off that it was not Athman.

More than ever before the old house struck me as mournful; and for the first time its air of desolation affected my spirits. I had unconsciously become accustomed to hearing Athman's cheery voice; to listening to his songs, his stories, his flute-music; to seeing him seated under the palm, engrossed in poetry, or in the study of English. Now that he

was absent, I missed him. I came to realise, too, during that long day of waiting, that more than half the charm which I had imputed to the house emanated from Athman. Without him the place reassumed its true character; it relapsed into sombre silence, and there grew within my mind a regret that I had not chosen some more cheerful habitation.

Embareck did not share my views. He listened to me with his usual courtesy, but negatived the proposal that Athman should be searched for.

"No, Sidi, do not seek him," he said. "He will return. I am old; I have seen many things. A man seeking a woman, or a hunter watching for game, are they not both alike? Interfere—and by Allah! they turn and rend you."

"But he may be in danger, Embareck."

The little man seated in the dust scratched himself thoughtfully.

"There is always danger in the desert, Sidi; but—the hunter comes again to his home. Allah leads him by the hand; he guides him in trackless places. God is great!"

The day dragged on slowly. Noon passed, and Athman had not returned. Embareck lay like a log in the shadow of a wall. I too indulged in a siesta, stretched on my camp-bed, but my sleep was uneasy, broken, much disturbed by the heat and the persistent annoyance of the flies. When I awoke I listened intently, hoping to hear Athman's voice conversing with Embareck—but all was quiet.



A large caravan of camels.

[To face page 272.]

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My imagination pictured forth possibilities. What was he doing ? what thinking ? what feeling ? Would he ever return ? A cloud as of imminent calamity darkened such speculations. With an effort I banished them from my mind.

At the sunset hour feeling the necessity for change I sought the open air. For long I wandered aimlessly hither and thither, until at length I found myself in the western market-place. There, on the warm dust, a large caravan of camels awaited the hour of departure. The level rays of the sun rested upon them. The animals, some standing, others lying down, looked singularly restful. Their surroundings too, seen faintly through a golden haze, breathed of peace and the repose that falls with the waning light. From within the neighbouring fondouk where their masters were making merry came the sound of song. The contrast between the peacefulness of the scene and the perturbation of my thoughts was poignant. Impatiently I turned away, and threading the narrow lanes that lay between me and the temple, ascended the minaret.

The sky was a flood of amber light, dyed as it approached the horizon with delicate depths of colour. As the sun set, these became more and more vivid, till at length they merged into a sea of crimson resembling blood. Long oblique flames like fiery fingers pointed at the desert. They seemed to mark it out for a mysterious doom ; in vague menace tracing some unutterable sentence, awful as the writing on the wall. To the East the sands had already sunk to rest. Fatigued by the

long heats, these Eastern plains were the first to feel the gentle alleviations of night.

A stir of solemn resurrection passed over the town. All at once, and as if they had been awaiting some inaudible summons, birds began to sing in the branches of isolated palm-trees ; shadowy figures appeared unexpectedly on the roofs ; the sound of camels roaring and donkeys braying rose from the market-place ; a perceptible coolness shivered in the air ; Tougourt roused herself from her day-dreams ; night was at hand.

As soon as I heard the soft footfall of Sidi Hadj Achmet ascending the stairs, I prepared to leave the minaret. Contrary to my usual custom I did not wait to hear him call the prayer, but betook myself homeward at a rapid pace. Embareck was seated on the house-top, smoking peacefully. I saw him from a turning in the lane some twenty yards before I reached the gate.

“ Has Athman returned ? ” I called eagerly.

“ No, Sidi,” came his reply.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ATHMAN'S RETURN.

MY one candle but emphasized the surrounding gloom. The feeble light flickered on the mud walls and on the rough palm-wood doorway with its curtain of camel's hide ; it drew attention to the obscurity that lurked behind the bed ; it pointed at the motionless flies settled one very available space ; it surprised the little mice that from time to time ran to and fro like timorous shadows at my feet.

The withdrawal of the sun had in no wise altered the deep pervading atmosphere of repose ; the silence of day had but given place to the hush of night ; instead of the desolation of sunlight, darkness had fallen ; the air had become cooler, stars were shining, and low on the Eastern horizon there was a faint promise of a moon.

Embareck was strangely quiet. Indeed, did I not know that he was there I should have imagined myself to be the only occupant of the house. The subtle odour of keef floated on the air. It came

from the room below, where the little hunter lay smoking in the darkness, awaiting sleep. My window was open to its widest, for even the slightest suspicion of a breeze was welcome.

I looked at my watch—it was close upon midnight. I was in no mood to sleep, so sat there gazing over the dark line of roofs at the sky. Now and again I recalled Athman to mind, and regretted that I had followed Embareck's advice. My guide I felt certain had returned to the café and would be found watching the dancer. I pictured him as I had seen him on the preceding night, seated on the bench, leaning forward, his chin resting on his hand, his eyes on fire, devouring every movement of the graceful figure.

Suddenly, breaking the quiet of the night came a low discordant noise—the creak of the outer gate. It grated on its hinges—paused—grated again, as if the person who wished to enter feared to disturb the household. My window commanded the court; I peered into the semi-blackness below. Again the gate creaked; a figure entered, closed the door behind it, and crossed the open space on noiseless feet.

“Athman, is it you?” I whispered.

The figure paused, and raised a head in my direction.

“Yes, Sidi. It is I,” came Athman's voice.

“Come here,” I said softly, “I wish to speak to you.”

I held the candle at the stair-head. He came up wearily—pausing at every step. At my request

he seated himself beside me upon the bed. The candle which I had placed upon a box at my side, sent its light over his person. I looked at him. There were unmistakable signs of exhaustion in his face—and yet his eyes shone with extraordinary vitality. He was strangely altered; it was as though a furnace blazed within him consuming his vitals. He returned my look with a steady gaze, so full of intensity, so raised above the levels of daily sensation that I could but stare at him in wonder. It had been my intention to have reproached him for his long absence, but face to face with this transfigured being my reproaches died upon my lips.

“Tell me about it, Athman,” I said.

A strange smile parted his lips—the fire in his eyes overspread his countenance obliterating every trace of fatigue.

“You have seen her, Sidi,” he cried, and in his voice there was a ring of glad passion that shook the air like a trumpet-call.

His manner held me silent. My sympathies were stirred to their depths. He swept on; his face aglow in the candle-light.

“How beautiful she is! I could watch her all day—all night—all my life. And her dancing; her little feet; her hands; her eyes; it is as if—as if—Ah, *Mon Dieu!* How can I tell?”

He broke off abruptly. The movement of his hands suggested the impotence of words. His eyes gazing past me were fixed on the starlit sky. In them was the rapt expression with which he had

watched the dancer from the bench beneath the arcade.

"You have been there all day, Athman?"

"All day," he repeated. His voice sounded far off. It was as though his body responded to my question in the absence of his soul.

"And where were you last night?"

He did not answer. I was forced to repeat my question. With an effort he collected his thoughts.

"Last night?" he said, wonderingly. "Was it only last night! Ah, yes, I remember. I could not stay here—*she* was in the desert. I went there. The Bedouin tents looked black in the starlight. I knew she was in one of them. I think the dogs barked, and someone spoke to me—but of that I am not sure. I sat down on a sand-hill. The stars watched over her. I said to myself 'I will watch over her too.'"

"All night!"

"Of course, Sidi. Sometimes I walked up and down; and once I made a little soft music on my flute—but only once, and not for long—I feared to waken her. At dawn an Arab woman gave me a cake—but I could not eat. When the sun rose she appeared. With her was an old man—he who plays when she dances. I ran to him—he remembered me—we embraced. I begged to be presented to her; but when he did so I could not speak. My heart was on fire, my knees trembled, and all the time I was devoured by the great fear that she would despise me. It was terrible."

His eyes grew troubled—his face became strangely grave. For a few moments the silence remained unbroken. I became conscious of the warm Southern night breathing upon us—a sympathetic presence listening to our words.

“Did she speak to you?” I asked.

“No,” he rejoined slowly. “She did not speak to me.”

“Strange! You were introduced?”

“No, Sidi; not strange.” He paused—then very softly, in the low tones to which men tune their voices when they speak of sacred things, he added:

“She is dumb.”

“Dumb!” I cried. Surprise held me breathless. My thoughts flew to the dancer. Again she floated before me; I saw again the gliding feet, the outstretched hands, the quiet mouth, the great dreaming eyes. Her grace and beauty returned to me with a new and deeper meaning—an added mystery—a more touching significance. She—the Voice of the South—was dumb.

Athman was unconscious of my surprise, so engrossed was he with his thoughts.

“And then?” I prompted.

“Then, Sidi, we returned to the café. She has a room there, but small—she who ought to live in a palace, or in the great desert, which is more beautiful than any palace. The day passed. How? I cannot tell. She was there.”

He paused, sat for a moment sunk in thought, then continued in a low concentrated voice: “I

was not always with her. Sometimes others spoke to her ; and once a man—a Bedouin Arab—caught her by the arm, touched her—with—his—hand !—I could have killed him. I leaned against the wall and watched them ; no one thought of me : but I suffered. Ah, yes, I suffered. Sidi, it is Hell itself to feel like that. My soul was sick ; my blood was a live flame running up and down my back. Never have I felt like that before—it frightened me. I was in agony—and yet to see her was Heaven. It is strange—very strange ! ”

“ And when the dancing was over, you came home ? ”

“ Came home, Sidi ? Yes. She sent me away. I did not want to go. I was afraid I would leave her behind me, but I can never do that again. She is with me now. I see her—I feel her. It is as if I have been dead all my life—but now I am alive. She is here—I have found her. Is it not wonderful !—wonderful ! ”

His voice sank to a whisper—the last word was barely audible upon his lips. The candle guttered to its death. We could dispense with its light for over the dark roofs rose a silver rim of moon. My mind was perturbed at this which had befallen Athman ; but no plan of action suggested itself to me. As we sat thus, surrounded by the immense quiet of night, bygone scenes connected with my guide rose before me. One after another they passed—from the moment when first I had seen him, to the evening when obedient to the call of Fate we had visited the café. All the loveable

qualities that had endeared him to me clamoured for recollection—his gaiety, his unfailing good-humour, his devotion in sickness, his kindness to children, his thoughtfulness to aged people. Was a nature such as this, capable of qualities so sterling, to be dragged to the depths by an infatuation for a dancing-girl? An immense sadness swept over me.

“Where will this end, Athman?”

The moon had circled above the roofs; its light shone upon his face.

“Allah knows,” he replied, and in his voice there was solemnity. “He alone sees the heart; he alone can foretell the future.” He paused; then his face working in the moonlight he burst out: “O Sidi! I am so unworthy of her. What shall I do? What shall I do? When I come near her, I tremble. I long to cast myself down and kiss the ground that is touched by her little feet. I know not what to do—she is so perfect; and I—I have but my love—that is all.”

“But, what would you have?” I cried in sympathy. “You would not *marry* her?”

“Marry her!” His voice shook as at the birth of some inconceivable joy.

“She—she is a dancing-girl, Athman!”

He bent his head; I listened in vain for a reply.

“Think of your friend Hamed.”

Still the figure at my side remained speechless.

“Athman!” I pleaded, laying my hand upon his shoulder. “Break it off. You know you

told me, out there in the desert, that dancing-girls were a danger to men. Reflect, before it is too late. You are ruining your life. Think of your prospects—of Egypt—of——”

“Egypt!”—He started to his feet. His voice rang through the room. Its tone of contemptuous pity was unmistakable. He towered above me. “Egypt!” he cried again. “And do you suppose that I think of Egypt *now*. Her little finger is more to me than all the world. To see her every day—that is all I ask. You speak of—of marriage?”—The words trembled from his lips; he bent towards me, and I saw that he shook with uncontrollable emotion. “*Mon Dieu!* if she will only marry me I—I will marry her to-morrow. If not, I will follow her always—always; all my life.”

He tossed his arms above his head, strode to the window, and leaned out into the night as if a sudden desire for air had come upon him.

It was strangely quiet. The moonlight cast Athman's shadow black upon the floor. A breath of hot wind came from the desert—it suggested the restlessness that cannot find relief in sleep. A feeling of depression seized me. Of what use to care? After all I was only a traveller, a momentary influence in his life. I mattered little to him; and yet he mattered much to me. I longed to help him; but my brain felt tired—thoughts refused to come.

“Athman,” I said.

“Sidi.”—The muffled voice sounded far-off.

“It grows late. We must go to bed.”

He crossed the room like a man in a dream.

"Good-night, Athman," I said as he reached the door.

"Good-night, Sidi," he rejoined absently.

The floor creaked ; the sound of retreating footsteps came from the staircase ; he stumbled often in the darkness. I listened till all was quiet. Then I recollected that, for the first time since he had been my servant, he had forgotten to bring me hot water.

CHAPTER XL.

THE SAND-STORM.

DAY after day passed and Athman was still thrall to his passion. My hopes that time would allay somewhat of his fever were not realised. On the contrary, every day supplied fresh fuel to the flame. The remembrance of our desert marches with their train of joyous associations, and the more immediate recollection of happy days spent at Tougourt, were blotted out by this thing that had come upon us. The old Arab town with its feet in the Sahara seemed to be the meet foster-mother to passion. Its silence and atmosphere of dreams, its sunlight and moonlight, its fierce noons and warm languorous nights—all stirred the blood and cried aloud to the imagination. The South as well as the woman had cast its spells over him. The presence of the desert out of whose mysteries the dancer had come, and to whom she must inevitably return when the season at Tougourt was over, never wholly absented itself from the mind. The city also was so essentially a desert thing with its voiceless lanes and alleys strewn with sand, that the thought of the one was associated ever with the recollection of

the other. To me during those days of unrest they assumed a strange personality, and unconsciously I came to think of them as of sirens powerful to harm. I longed to quit the town—to retreat northward ; thus, and thus only, did it seem to me that I could save Athman. But Athman would not come.

There were times when I contemplated the existing relations between Athman and myself with a consciousness of whimsical amusement. He was my guide — indeed one may say my servant ; yet since meeting the dancer, he appeared to be oblivious of the fact.

He had been such a source of pleasurable interest that I knew myself to be fathoms deep in his debt. Nay more ; I was thankful for this opportunity of proving my gratitude ; and now that evil days had come upon him I resolved to see him through. Nor was this as unselfish a resolution as it may appear. My interest and my curiosity were equally aroused. Knowing Athman as I did, I felt as if I were playing more than a spectator's part in this drama of African love. Its intensity enthralled me. Witnessing its effect one dimly surmised the existence of inner depths of passion fierce and barbarous as the South—the loves and lusts of savage races, over which the veneer of civilization lay thin as the ice that skims some dangerous pool. One felt too that at any moment the unforeseen might happen, for the atmosphere was sultry, pregnant with vague calamity, ominous as the hour that precedes a storm.

Athman had woefully altered. The first exhilaration of love had passed away. He was now full of a feverish energy that alternated with periods of complete inanition bordering on despair. Under the influence of the latter he would sit for hours, brooding in the shadow of the wall, his chin sunk to his knees, his hands clenched, the veins of his forehead swollen, his eyes pits of smouldering fire. At such times neither Embareck nor I spoke to him. At nightfall he invariably returned to the café.

What passed between Athman and the dancer I never knew. After his one outburst of confidence he spoke but seldom, and then only in broken and disjointed sentences. Passion had seared itself too deeply into his heart to find vent in words. He rarely was conscious of my presence; there were times however when he awoke to the realisation of his surroundings; then would his eyes seek mine wistfully, and I read within them a confession of suffering that grieved me. I knew that he longed to speak—yet could not.

Since the first fateful occasion, I had not revisited the café, nor had I again seen the dancer. Little by little curiosity awoke within me and I longed to know more about this woman of the South who had cast her toils over my guide. It appeared to me that could I but speak to her I might be able to persuade her to leave him alone. She was beautiful—she must have many lovers—one more or less would matter little to her. With such a woman money would be all powerful; I

might purchase Athman's freedom with a bracelet or a handful of silver.

Thus I reasoned ; the difficulty lay in putting my plan into execution without his knowledge. Fate however befriended me.

One afternoon the Caïd of Tougourt sent a message to Athman, requesting him to give a reading upon the following day. From so great a man a request savoured of command. Athman accepted the invitation, though I could see that the mere idea of doing anything but watch the dancer was repugnant to him.

" You will come, Sidi ? " he said.

" I am not asked, Athman."

" That does not matter. The Caïd will be glad. I read there whenever I come to Tougourt, and have already taken friends with me. Besides, I would like you to come with me."

He spoke simply, and with a naïve trust in my friendship that touched me ; yet this opportunity to see the dancer alone was too good to be missed—it might not occur again. I shook my head.

" I have another engagement, Athman."

He looked at me sadly, with wonder in his eyes. I could see that he was searching for the reason of my refusal. He knew all my Tougourt acquaintances ; what possible engagement could I have ? It was strange ; he could not understand it ; never before had I failed him.

Upon the following day a sandstorm enveloped the city. I had lain awake during more than one of the dark hours listening to the wind, and the

branches of my palm-tree labouring mightily. As the day passed, the storm increased. No one ventured out of doors. The darkened rooms were full of sand. It floated on the air ; it permeated everywhere ; it lay thick as aged dust upon floor and bed. The discomfort was indescribable. Embareck, completely covered with his immense burnous, lay motionless in a corner. Athman kept to his room. Occasionally, mingling with the howling of the wind came the sound of his flute—an inarticulate wail, unutterably sad, as of a dumb thing striving to speak. It made me think of the woman whom he loved—the woman whose soul could find its way into movement but not into words.

At dusk, which fell a full hour earlier than usual, I lighted my candle and essayed to interest myself in a book ; but I could not read. Without, in the increasing gloom deep was calling unto deep ; the desert was at last lifting up its voice—a dread and mighty sound ; overhead the palm was shrieking like a demented thing ; and when I peered into the blackness I could see sand, sand, and yet again sand whirling amid the flying horrors of the sky.

I remained for long motionless—listening—my heart within my ears, my nerves in a state of tension that was unbearable. Athman's voice raised suddenly caused me to start.

“ I am going now, Sidi. Good-night.”

“ Good-night, Athman.”

The wind drowned further conversation.

In five minutes more I had left the house. The black streets were alive with sand : it eddied

through the air thick as a London fog ; underfoot it lay deep, deadening all sound. At the corners, and in the market-place, I was forced to struggle against the violence of the gale. It thundered overhead like the clapping of an immense sail ; it passed dismally into the distance ; it touched deep and solemn notes, changing ever like the movements of some great orchestra. A hoarse booming noise came from the desert—a fearsome sound giving an impression of strength and unrestrained passion. Here—within the city it was bad enough ; but there !—God only knows the turmoil that raged in the utter blackness of the night.

Laboriously and with many pauses to regain breath I toiled up the hill that led to the Arab café. No one was abroad. At length I neared the building. The light struggling outwards enabled me to see the vortex of sand through which I had fought my way. Sounds of music reached my ears, broken, fitful—the gale snatching at them swept them away into darkness. Raising the curtain I entered the hall.

The same dreary dance which I had witnessed upon the occasion of my previous visit was taking place. Seated upon the mud floor were the same rows of Arabs, but fewer in number and with no intermixture of French soldiery. I gazed in all directions, but of the dancer Aïsha and her aged musician I could discover no trace. Suddenly I saw Si-Abdelmoummen. He was seated under the arcade, wholly engrossed in watching the contortions of the performer. I crossed to him.

"Where is Aïsha?" I inquired, after the customary greetings had taken place.

He held up his hand; in the gesture there was a touch of languid reproof.

"Wait, Monsieur," he murmured. "This dancer will soon be finished. Give yourself the trouble to be seated."

I took his advice. From time to time the young interpreter, his head on one side, sighed with an air of rapture. The dance over, he turned to me.

"Pardon, Monsieur," he said politely, "I interrupted you. I adore dancing. Listen to the wind. *Mon Dieu!* what a storm! *un vrai temps de chien; n'est ce pas?* How disagreeable it is, this sand." And he shook the powdery atoms from his draperies with a disgusted air.

"Have you seen Aïsha?" I repeated.

He shrugged a lazy shoulder; his pale face expressed indifference.

"Is she not here to-night?" I continued, my eyes searching in all directions.

"No; she is not here. She is unfortunate; you see, her musician is ill, so she cannot dance."

I must have betrayed disappointment, for Si-Abdelmoummen smiled faintly, with the superior air of one who finds amusement in the follies of others.

"Monsieur came to see her? Ah, it is a pity she is not here. Without doubt she is beautiful; she has grace, but"—he again shrugged a shoulder—"for my part, I do not like dark women. Mbarka now—how different! A skin like satin—

pink and white as a flower. He! he! that is worthy of our poet-friend Alouï. By-the-way, where is he? How comes it that he is not with you?"

I explained Athman's absence.

"Good," he nodded his white turban in dignified approval. "I am glad he is with the Caïd; to read will give him distraction. *C'est un brave garçon*, but—when he is in love he becomes a little tiresome. To be in love oneself is different; but when others love I feel bored. Monsieur thinks as I do—yes?"

"No," I said bluntly, "I do not find him tiresome. He is miserable."

Si-Abdelmoummen yawned, lighted a cigarette, then beckoned to the negro-proprietor and gave an order for coffee. Above the voices of the Arabs was to be heard the intermittent howling of the gale. When an incomer or outgoer raised the curtain that concealed the doorway, the wind entering in gusts caused the torches to gutter fiercely. The yellow light fell in lurid and uncertain splashes—forcing figures to stagger like drunken men—dashing the long shadows this way and that—making the scene tremulous and unreal as a nightmare. Although the atmosphere was thick with sudden shudders of sand-laden wind, the night was oppressive in its heat. An air of dejection—as of something incomplete and out of place, yet something forced to proceed—weighed upon the performance. The dancers huddled together on their bench; the Arabs conversed in

guttural whispers or sat silent on the wavering floor; only the gigantic negro stalked up and down, his leopard skin fluttering, his gestures alternately slavish and domineering.

"Pah!" grunted Si-Abdelmoummen, and he spat upon the floor.

"This coffee is all sand to-night. *C'est dégoûtant.*"

The music burst into dreary revelry. A woman stepped from the daïs to the floor, placed her hands upon her hips and began to dance. In her movements there was the monotony of extreme weariness. Si-Abdelmoummen settled himself to watch her.

"Tell me about Aïsha?" I inquired.

He looked at me with ill-concealed annoyance.

"This woman is ugly," I said with a gesture towards the performer. "She dances badly. Let us talk."

He cast a look at the posturing figure—a look that was half whimsical, half regretful—blew a cloud of smoke into the air then resigned himself to the situation.

"What does monsieur desire?"

"Tell me all you know about the dancer Aïsha; you will be doing me a favour. Without doubt you know much. You are in the police; and besides you are an authority in Tougourt."

He lifted a languid and protesting hand, but his smile told me that the compliment had gone home. I edged myself nearer to him.

"Why do you wish to know?" he inquired suddenly.

I gazed into his eyes, now semi-closed and full of craftiness, weighed chances in the balance, and took him into my confidence. He listened to what I had to say with surprising attention. When I had finished he nodded his head, and leaning towards me so that his words could not be overheard, began to speak in short jerky sentences :

"All I know ? It is so little. The woman has never been here before. She comes from the far South. Can you hear me ?"

"Not very well. Speak louder ; this noise is deafening."

"The old man taught her to dance ; he bought her the clothes she wears—she owes everything to him. He makes all the arrangements—you understand ? What is that monsieur says ? Dumb ? Yes, that is true. There is some tragic story about that, but I have not been able to find it out. The old man would not tell me."

He paused, glanced thoughtfully at the dancer moving backwards down the open space, then continued in a slow unemotional voice :

"Once I knew a woman who was dumb. Her tongue had been cut out by a discarded lover. Horrible ? Oh, yes, perhaps ! He said to her : 'As you will not speak to me you shall speak to no other man.' You see, he was jealous."

The music rose in a frenzied outburst. We listened to it in silence. Again the interpreter spoke :

"It is very original for a dancer to be dumb. Yes. To be beautiful, to dance well, and to be

dumb—that pleases the Arabs. We do not like a woman who talks much, we Arabs. He! he! Aïsha has much success; *elle est bizarre*; she attracts one; but, for my part, she is too dark—I adore fair women. Mbarka, now—Ah, here she comes. *Quelle chance!* Monsieur will excuse me?”

And he turned to greet the approaching dancer.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE BARGAIN.

CROSSING the hall I left the café by the inner door leading to the court of the dancing-girls. As I quitted the shelter of the building, the wind falling upon me all but swept me from my feet. The court was plunged in darkness; overhead a black pall stretched unbroken; only in the immediate vicinity of the door where the torch-light struggled with the storm the air was a vortex of flying sand. Suddenly, as I stood uncertain whither to go someone ran upon me. I staggered at the shock and instinctively clutched the newcomer. I became conscious of a woman's form—though young or old I could not determine, enveloped as she was from head to foot in draperies. For a moment we stood thus, the one supporting the other, rocked to and fro by the wind. Then, on account of a fold of her haïk becoming displaced, and the light from the door streaming upon us, I recognised the woman I sought—Aïsha—the dancing-girl. Still retaining hold of her arms and approaching my mouth to her ear, I shouted :

"I wish to speak to you ; you understand—speak—to—you."

I choked on the last word—my mouth filled with sand. She freed herself with a sudden movement and in the darkness her hand found mine ; its fingers were warm, nervous, and curiously powerful. I felt myself drawn outwards into the blackness of the court where the sand gyrated in whirlwinds. I followed unresisting. The light paled behind us ; the wind raved overhead ; and through the groping darkness came the uplifted voices of the desert. The court was some fifteen yards in width ; hand in hand we crossed to the farther side. Under the lee of the wall we experienced considerable shelter from the fury of the gale. We halted before one of the rooms occupied by the women of the Ouled Nails during their term of engagement as dancing-girls. I heard a key grate in the lock, the clumsy palm-wood door creak loudly on its hinges, then the hand that held mine was withdrawn, and I felt myself pushed into the darkness of the interior. While I stood motionless, my back against a wall, a point of pale blue flame sputtered on the sight, and as the sulphur-match burned fitfully, the woman's hand, arm, and figure loomed before me. When she had lighted a candle that stood on a broken stool I saw that we were in a tiny room, possibly eight feet by ten, half of which was raised in a *daïs* covered with a carpet. Suspended on the whitewashed walls were a water-bag of goat's-skin, an iron frying pan, and a coffee-pot with a long handle. In the remote corner of the *daïs*

lay what appeared to be a bundle of cast-off clothing.

As I gazed around me, interested in the details of this humble home, an unexpected noise caused me to turn suddenly upon my companion. She stood beside me, candle in hand, rigid in every limb, staring fixedly at the bundle in the corner. The haïk had fallen from her head ; her dark hair was dishevelled and bereft of ornament ; a fierce light glittered in her eyes and seen in the flickering candle-light the frown between her brows showed ominous. Again the strange sound came from between her teeth ; it was half hiss, half snarl, and more than any other noise I have ever heard, betrayed anger. To know her dumb, to see her beautiful, and to hear her give vent to a noise so ferocious—I may almost say bestial—startled me beyond expression. I watched her—spell-bound.

Placing a candle on the edge of the daïs she darted forward and tugged at the bundle with both hands. Under the insistence of her touch the thin black stuff tore across, and to my astonishment revealed the face of the aged musician. It became evident that, feeling himself ill he had crept into the shelter of her room. Roused thus roughly he raised himself on his elbow, his face distorted with pain, his white lips quivering. The sight of his sufferings aroused no feelings of compassion in this desert woman, on the contrary it appeared as if his very helplessness fanned her anger into yet fiercer flame. She sprang forward—her movements were swift, passionate, and wondrously grace-

ful. Her eyes blazed, her little bare foot stamped the ground, and stretching forth a naked arm she pointed imperiously to the door.

"Stop!" I shouted in Arabic. The word broke upon the silence with startling effect. They both faced me—the woman in amazement—the man with the dull indifference of suffering.

"He is ill," I cried hotly. "Do not send him away. It is I who must go."

For a moment Aïsha stared at me; then upon the daïs in the yellow candle-light she burst into pantomime.

Raising her arms she danced a few gliding steps of her wonderful desert dance; bent her head as if to receive money; raised herself erect; pointed in a heat of passionate resentment at the old man; swept the imaginary coins from her forehead; dashed them with a despairing gesture upon the ground; then tossing her arms upwards broke into laughter—horrible silent laughter that caused the flesh to creep with its suggestions of impotent rage and thwarted lust of gain.

The storm shook the house; through the wild night came the barbaric sound of Arab music.

Aïsha leaped from the daïs, seized the old man in her arms, staggered to the door, and pushed him violently into the night. It was done so suddenly, so swiftly, that before I could interfere it was over. I sprang to assist him for he had fallen to his knees, but Aïsha divining my intention barred the passage with her body. In vain I tried to thrust her aside—she resisted my

efforts with a strength that surprised me. While we struggled, the old man disappeared in the direction of the café, a mere shadow in a whirl of flying sand. Again the door was closed ; this time the woman and I were alone.

Indignation at her cruelty and ingratitude took possession of me. If she could thus wantonly treat an old and suffering man, and one to whom she owed so much, what mercy could I expect for Athman.

Very gracefully the dancer seated herself upon the daïs and signed to me to follow her example. I complied with her request. The wind entering beneath the door caused the candle to flicker, at times indeed it seemed as if it must be extinguished. The restless light faintly illuminated the little cell-like room ; it played fitfully over the seated figure by my side, casting its shadow in dim distortion upon the wall. She appeared to be oblivious of my presence. Leaning forward she rummaged in a hole beneath the daïs, then withdrew an oblong box of some dark wood bound around with bands of antique brass. This she placed before her, unlocked, then began to don the jewelry that it contained. I watched her in silence.

One by one the ornaments decked her—the heavy silver anklets—the massive bracelets—the chain of coins—the golden crown with its circle of uncut gems. They fell naturally into their places with a singular appropriateness, lighting her strange dark beauty as stars the desert. While so occupied her manner was absorbed, devoid of self-conscious-

ness ; from time to time she consulted a cracked mirror pinned against the wall. At length the box stood empty. Pushing it from her with her toes, she drew herself up, turned to me and smiled. With difficulty I repressed a shudder. This woman with her beauty, her jewels, her cruelty, her nameless origin, her mysterious mutilation, attracted yet repelled me. I gazed at her with the same horrible fascination that I would have gazed at a beautiful serpent, rearing itself upward from a labyrinth of iridescent coils—its eyes baleful stars—its loveliness but a lure enticing to destruction. I forced an answering smile.

“Beautiful,” I murmured.

Pleasure sprang to her face. Her beauty gained an added lustre. Wonder took possession of me. Surely this outward grace must shadow forth some inward perfection. And yet as I gazed the smile faded, the light in her eyes grew cold, and I became conscious of the birth of suspicion. Her expression was at once vigilant, hard, calculating. She was groping within her mind for the reason of my visit. Neither of us broke the silence, but like two combatants we watched each other warily—she prepared to act on the defensive—I pondering how to strike. At last I spoke.

“You know Athman?”

Her hands fluttered a negative.

“Athman Aloui ben Salah,” I insisted. “You *do* know him. He comes here every night to watch you dance. He wears a red fez and a blue burnous.”

A curious affirmative noise came from her throat. Encouraged I continued.

“He loves you—the love of a boy—he is young—it has made him miserable. I have come to ask you to set him free.”

A smile parted her lips ; she shook her head.

“Listen !” I cried, leaning forward and laying a finger on her knee. “You have many lovers. I have heard that desert women can be generous—give him up.”

Anger burned in her eyes. She flung back my interceding hand. The suspicious look of the dumb stamped itself on every feature. Her gesture said plainly : “What is this to you ?” I hastened to explain.

“He is my friend. I wish to see him happy. Formerly he was always happy, now he is miserable. His love is a little thing in your eyes ; you would not miss it ; be generous—give it up.”

At every word her fury increased. The strange sound I had before heard when she had vented her indignation upon the musician hissed from between her teeth. Under her fingers the stuff of her dress strained to the point of tearing. The barbaric gems in her crown glared like a row of angry eyes ; two, in especial, set close together transfixed me with their light—a hot and venomous red. To see her struggling for expression was piteous.

“Hear me !” I shouted, unconsciously raising my voice, as though the loudness of my tone would drown the passion that was shaking her. “Hear me ; let me speak. I have a proposal to make.”

Conquering her violence with an effort she continued to eye me from under ominous brows. I continued quickly :

“ I do not expect you to do what I ask for nothing. I will give you money. See, this represents my friend Athman.” I laid a scrap of paper on the carpet. “ And this will be yours if you give him up.” I placed a gold coin at a little distance from the paper. “ And now—choose. Which will you have ? ”

Cupidity awoke within her. For long she gazed at the coin fascinated by its lustre ; then very slowly turned and looked at me. Again I read suspicion in her glance.

“ It is gold,” I said reassuringly. “ A Nazarene piece of money ; worth a great handful of silver. Besides ”—and I pointed to her bosom—“ you can add it to that chain.”

Her thoughts centred themselves upon the ornament. She touched the coins that composed it caressingly, telling them one after another as if they were holy beads ; every golden piece as it passed between her fingers whispered to her to seize the newcomer glittering there within easy reach at her feet. Slowly she stretched out her hand until it all but reached the money—hesitated—then reluctantly withdrew it. Her mind was made up. Pointing to the paper she tapped the carpet near it with her forefinger, then waved her open hand as though dismissing the temptation with scorn.

Watching her narrowly, I drew another coin from

my pocket and added it to the one on the floor. I saw her catch at her breath ; but her hesitation was shorter this time. Returning my gaze with the light of growing avarice in her eyes, she shook her head. My heart sank ; for the first time I recognised that I had undertaken a task more difficult by far than I had anticipated. Yet I would not go back.

One by one the coins piled themselves into a small but glittering heap on the carpet. I was fast nearing the end of my supply. With every addition I hoped to reach the high water-mark of this woman's greed, but again and again I was doomed to disappointment. And yet she was deeply moved ; her excitement was painful to witness. Leaning forward she sat with hands clasped around her knees, her eyes riveted upon the gold. As each coin struck the others the metallic tinkle called to something within her, for a shudder passed through her frame and her breath came labouring from between her lips ; yet she continued obstinately to shake her head.

Impatience and indignation consumed me. I became desperate. The little piece of paper looked so insignificant, so worthless, compared with the money ; and yet—it was Athman's soul, and this woman and I were bargaining for it.

My last coin fell from my fingers. Still her gestures clamoured : " More ! more ! "

" I have no more," I said hoarsely. " It is my last coin. Choose."

She raised her head. Her eyes sought mine—within them I read the insatiable lust of possession.

For a moment they held me prisoner seeking to read my thoughts ; then leaving my face, they travelled slowly over my person. When they reached my right hand they stopped. Pointing to my ring with insistent gestures she signed that it too should be added to the pile. It was a gold signet-ring—my father's—and one which I prized more than I can express.

I cried out against this demand.

Her lips curved into a smile ; she shrugged her shoulders. Very daintily she picked up the scrap of paper and made as if to burn it at the candle-flame, watching me the while with vigilant eyes. There was a horrible suggestiveness in the action. It seemed to me, stirred as I was by the wild night and the wilder scenes I had witnessed, that this was no paper—but Athman—his very flesh and blood, nay more, his great passionate heart and poet's soul that she was daintily offering to the flames. My ring dwindled into insignificance. In a flash I had forced it from my finger and flung it down upon the gold.

The action arrested her. The paper fluttered unheeded to the ground. With a low gasp of pleasure she fell to counting the money.

Wiping my forehead I drew a deep breath. Victory was mine ; yet so suddenly had it come that I was barely conscious of its significance. Mechanically I picked up the scrap of paper and replaced it in my pocket. When I had done so I felt more at my ease and as if the trivial action had made Athman's safety doubly sure.

Still she counted, testing the coins between her teeth, forcing them to ring loud the one against the other. Her beauty, as she sat there upon the daïs, was incontestable. She looked like some strange Southern goddess, gem-bedecked ; the little cell-like room became a shrine—the solitary candle, a votive offering—the heap of yellow coins, the golden sacrifices of her worshippers. She had quite forgotten me. Her dark inarticulate soul was possessed by the tinkling things that touched her lips and fell in a golden rain from her fingers.

Watching her silently, the pathos of the sight grew within my mind. Now that the fight was over I ceased to bear her resentment ; nay more, I almost ceased to associate her with Athman. The tragedy of this woman's life struck home to the heart with an awful sense of horror. She was young and fair to look upon, yet through the veil of her beauty I read the unutterable degradation of her race. The cruelty of it sickened me. A feeling of immense sadness came over me. I longed to do any little thing which might show compassion, even though it were but a word spoken gently.

"Aïsha," I murmured.

She did not hear. A coin tinkled faintly against another. I laid a hand on her shoulder. She started, and I think was about to smile for her face softened, but before she had time to do more than look at me, the door opened with a crash, and someone burst into the room. It was Athman.

For a moment there was silence—then Aïsha uttered a low cry and shrank in terror against the

wall. I stared at him speechless, for as he caught sight of the gold upon the carpet his face became distorted with passion, and in his eyes blazed a hell of jealous fire such as I pray to God I may never behold again.

CHAPTER XLII.

IN THE NIGHT.

THERE are moments that lie beyond the reach of language, moments when some terrible truth breaks in upon the soul, when the heart becomes on the instant too big for words ; when passion, never voluble, ceases even to be articulate. Such a moment had come to Athman.

The sight of him standing there, suffering the tortures of the damned, unnerved me. I longed to speak, to right myself in his eyes, and yet the falsity of my position and the utter futility of words struck me dumb. My refusal to accompany him to the Caïd ; my pretended engagement ; the money at the woman's feet ; my hand upon her shoulder—all conspired to build up such a train of damaging evidence that for the moment I bent beneath the finger of fate. Circumstances had tricked me.

One idea dominated my mind—to remove Athman from this woman before the passion that raged within him had time to goad him to some irreparable deed. Mechanically I rose to my feet.

As I did so the storm, waking suddenly, cried

aloud with a new and strange insistence ; and from the door which Athman's entrance had left ajar, there fell on us a fierce gust of wind. In the twinkling of an eye we were plunged in darkness. For a moment I steadied myself against the wall ; then, as the turmoil subsided, with outstretched hands I sought the door. No sound told of the woman huddled in the corner ; but of Athman's presence I was acutely, nay painfully, conscious.

As I stumbled into the darkness of the court I heard him following me. Through the gate that led to the lane we groped, the one behind the other. The wind shuddered around us, driving stinging clouds of sand into our faces. I walked unsteadily, fighting my onward way with frequent pauses for breath. But though my physical powers were fully occupied in combating the difficulties that beset me, my whole thinking being was engrossed with the man who was following me through the night, his soul black and savage as the elements. I heard no sound save the shrieking of the gale ; yet I did not look behind, for I knew that he was there. I knew too that he must overtake me soon.

Abruptly the lane descended ; I all but fell over the loose stones. My hands, outstretched to save myself, came into contact with the rough surface of a wall—apparently the wall of some invisible building. In its vicinity there was shelter.

"Stop !" cried a voice.

The hoarse strangled sound came from behind me ; in it there was a note of menace—the cry of

one strained past endurance. I peered into the night. The encompassing blackness lay heavy as a pall ; it was impossible to see one's hand before one's face. Yet though I could not see him, I was seized with the impression that he was feeling for me in the darkness.

" I am here," I said.

The wind fell suddenly. The breathless hush that followed seemed strange and unnatural. With bated breath, my back against the wall, I stood listening, but for long the death-like stillness remained unbroken. At length through the stagnant night his words burst forth—words the actual meaning of which I but dimly understood, for he was back to the Arabic of his boyhood—yet there could be no mistaking the passion that rocked him, for the fires of an ungovernable jealousy fed upon his soul.

I listened, speechless. The hot thick language, guttural and fierce, pouring upon me from the darkness, awed me like the outburst of a tropical storm—a savage irresponsible thing whose fury it would be folly to resist. The note of menace grew every moment deeper ; he was lashing himself into a white-heat ; his bitter reproaches seemed the inevitable prelude to a blow. Calling to mind his knife worn loose in his sash, I silently shifted my position.

My sympathies were entirely with him. He had every reason to imagine that I had played him false. Yet though I longed to speak, I felt that he was far beyond the reach of language ; that in this frenzied

state he would listen to no words of mine. I could but bide my time, resolved to take advantage of any opportunity that might occur.

Suddenly in the midst of his anger he paused for breath.

"Aïsha——" I began.

An oath cut the darkness—a savage sound that was scarcely human, a sound trembling with the extremity of hate. Before I had time to move, or even to think, I was conscious of a rush of something past me, grazing my shoulder, followed on the instant by the snap of steel breaking off short against the wall. In the instinct of self-preservation my hand shot out and grasped a wrist. A muffled exclamation broke the silence—a gasp that ended in a groan.

For a moment we stood thus ; then, conquering my excitement with an effort, I said with a calmness I was far from feeling :

"Athman, let me speak."

He made no reply ; his wrist became limp under my grasp.

"Listen," I continued. "Appearances are against me, yet I am not false. I went there to-night, not for her sake, but for yours."

A bitter, incredulous laugh, stifled at its birth, came from the blackness at my side.

"It is true," I insisted ; "I swear it before God. You were wretched—she had made you so. I wanted to see her alone to ask her to set you free."

"But the money ?" The words rasped hoarsely.

"Was the price of your freedom."

His wrist snatched itself from me.

"Freedom!" he roared. "And what business is that of yours? You—a Nazarene—an infidel—to visit her—to tempt her with your accursed gold. Freedom! *my* freedom! *Mon Dieu!* do I wish my freedom? No! not if you offered me the world."

"She is unworthy of you," I said slowly.

Again his anger burst forth.

"Unworthy! *She* unworthy of *me!* And *you* to tell me so." Again he laughed bitterly. "Ah, one can see that you are no Arab!"

"Why not?" I ejaculated.

"To accept the hospitality of an Arab woman and then—to speak evil of her behind her back."

The deep irony of his tones cut me to the quick.

"Say what you like," I retorted hotly; "but it is true. No; don't interrupt me; hear me out. Athman, you said once that Englishmen always spoke the truth—do you remember?"

He gave a suspicious assent.

"You will believe me to speak the truth now?"

He did not reply.

I paused a moment, then said seriously:

"All I say now I say because I know it to be true. It hurts me to give you pain, yet I must speak. Athman, she *is* unworthy of you. She is not a good woman—she would not make you happy. She would sell her very soul for gold."

"No!"

"Yes, she would. Listen; she knows you love

her, yet she would not release you till she had been paid for it with every coin that I had brought with me to-night. What was your love in her eyes compared with a handful of gold? Nothing. If you married her, she would sell your life; aye, and your honour too, if she could but get her price."

"I—I do not believe it."

The muttered words told of his torture.

"You do believe it," I said sadly, "for it is true. And moreover, she is cruel."

"Not cruel!" he cried piteously.

"Yes, cruel. You know the old man who plays for her. You know that he taught her to dance—that she owes him everything—everything?"

"What of that?" he retorted. "Does she not repay him a thousand times?"

"Repay him. How—do you think? To-night he was ill; he could not play; he crept into her room to get away from the noise and from the storm. She found him there—I know it for I was with her. Was she sorry for him? No; she was furious with him for being ill; he prevented her earning money. She sprang upon him, and in spite of his age and sufferings she flung him into the court; flung him cruelly, Athman, as you would not have the heart to fling a dog."

A groan reached me. I felt for his misery, yet I did not regret my words. If I could but succeed in disillusioning him it would be the truest kindness.

The storm had completely died away, only from the desert came a faint moaning sound wailing

through the darkness. Around us in the benighted streets all was voiceless as the grave.

Athman did not speak. Anxiously I stood waiting, longing for, yet dreading what he might say. At length I could bear the suspense no longer. I reached out a hand and found his shoulder leaning against the wall.

"Athman," I pleaded.

There was no reply. A shudder passed through him. He spoke, and his words reached me from infinite depths of suffering.

"I cannot," he whispered.

"You will not give her up?"

"No," he cried sternly, "I will not." Then his voice quivering in a passionate burst of emotion, "O Sidi!" he wailed, "how can I? I love her! I love her!" and breaking down utterly, the quiet night shook with his sobs.

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN UNEXPECTED DEPARTURE.

THE sun was setting over the desert. The feet of our camels appeared to wade through a sea of ruddy gold. Athman and I were returning to Tougourt after a two days' visit to the oasis of Temacin.

It had taken all my powers of persuasion to induce Athman to leave the town for even so short a period as two days ; and although to give me pleasure he had eventually consented to accompany me, yet the expedition had been to him a term of banishment so depressing that all my efforts to rouse him had proved in vain. Now however that we were again within sight of Tougourt, a restless excitement had come upon him ; his eyes, no longer sad and abstracted, burned with a feverish light, and by every means in his power he sought to induce his camel to increase her pace.

Steadily we approached. Despite Athman's exertions, my camel out-distanced his by several yards. I was the first to enter the city. As I began to thread the dusky lane that led in the direction of my house, a sudden impulse prompted me to turn in my saddle. Athman's camel stood riderless.

The Arab to whom the animal belonged was staring into a dark passage that skirted the ruined walls. He had the bewildered air of a man taken by surprise. For a moment he stood motionless, apparently watching something that fled into the obscurity. Then, his attention released, he turned to me with a gesture that conveyed more plainly than words the Oriental acceptance of the inevitable. Silently we resumed our interrupted progress.

By the time I reached my Arab home darkness had already fallen. It was strangely quiet—strangely desolate. Only from beneath the palm-tree a red eye of fire glowed dully. As the shout of the camel-driver broke upon the stillness, the little hunter emerged from the obscurity.

“Welcome, O Sidi,” he said ; then, gazing at our diminished party, he inquired :

“But—the Sidi has returned alone ? Where then is Alouï, the son of Salah ? ”

“Of what need to ask ? ” I replied. “He left us but now at the city gates. We will sup without him, for he will not return till midnight—perchance not till morning.”

Embareck fixed me with his one melancholy eye.

“As the Sidi says. Fate draws him by the heart-strings. Aie ! It is the will of Allah. The desert is great, yet the ostrich fleeth in vain from the bullet of destiny. How shall it be otherwise with men. Yea, a man is water running downhill when a woman awaiteth him at the bottom.”

The camel-driver, who had listened attentively to our conversation, broke into hoarse comment :

"True, true ; love is a curse that weakeneth the knees. Now, the son of Salah should seek a remedy. A bone blessed by a Marabout and worn always above the fifth rib is of much assistance in such matters. I bought one many moons ago—praise be to Allah ! "

The heads of the camels looming above their master appeared to nod in supercilious assent.

Silently the little hunter and I partook of our evening meal—a cous-cous of goat's flesh served in the court under the palm-tree. Supper finished, I retreated to my room. Barely had I lighted my candle, when the noise of hasty steps held me motionless. As I gazed at the door in wondering anticipation, the curtain of camel's skin was violently torn aside and Athman appeared in the entrance. He was out of breath with running. Despair stamped itself upon his face. Gesticulating violently, he gasped :

"She is gone ! "

"Gone ? " I ejaculated.

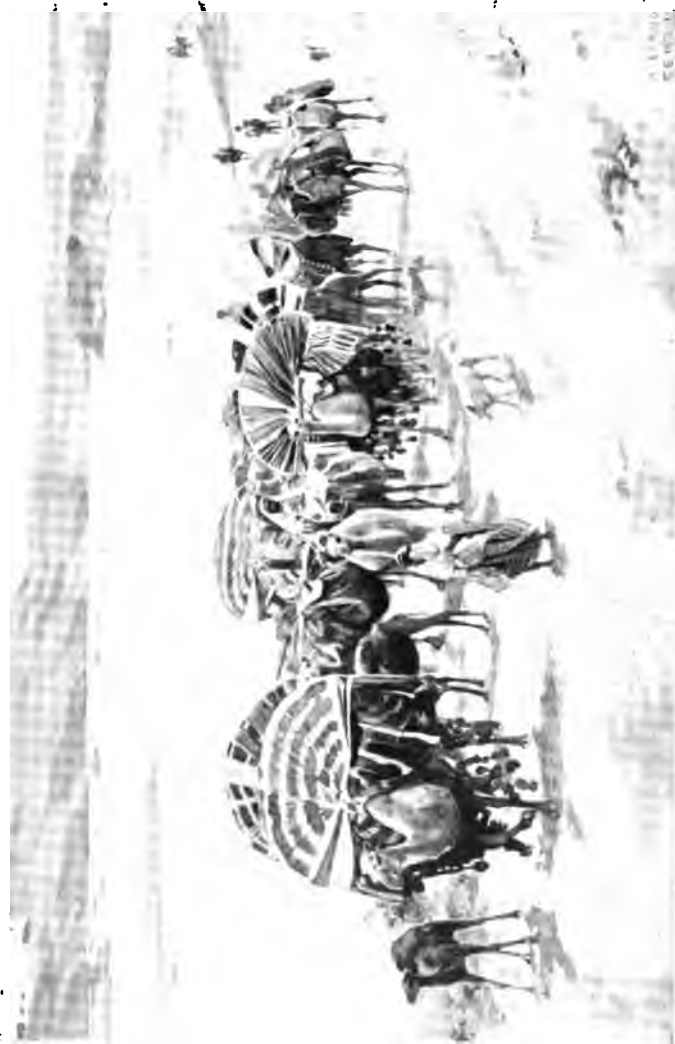
"Yes," he cried ; then with a rush : "Gone—this morning—at dawn the caravan started for Djelfa."

Surprise kept me silent. He swept on :

"I have been to the café—it is closed—the palanquins are gone from the roofs—her room is locked up—it is all dark."

The relief that came to me with his words must have shown itself in my face, for suddenly he turned upon me, the light of suspicion in his eyes.

"You ! " he roared ; "you have done this thing."



A caravan started for Djelfa.

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"I?"

"Yes, you. Oh, I see it now! You hated her. You wished to separate us. You persuaded me to go to Temacin. You have kept me there for two days, so that I should be away when she started. Oh, I see it all now, and I hate you for it! Yes, I hate you—I hate you."

"Athman!" My voice rang through the room; its tone forced him to listen. I continued:

"You are wrong. I did not know that she was to start this morning. I am as much surprised as you are."

He gazed long at me. Suspicion fading from his face was succeeded by the look of a bewildered child suffering pain that it cannot understand. For a moment he stood speechless; then turning his back he sat down upon my bed.

Through the hot night came the distant sound of a camel's roar. The faint melancholy noise associated itself with thoughts of the caravan far out in the desert—of the camp under the stars—of the first halt on the long journey to Djelfa. The idea must have occurred to Athman, for as if stung into sudden pain he moved uneasily and a low groan broke from his lips. I laid a hand on his shoulder. He did not move. For a moment I stood silent; then very softly I spoke—with no wish, God knows, but to alleviate if possible the first bitterness of his despair. The night was very still; no sound but my voice, sunk almost to a whisper, stirred the silence of the little candle-lit room. When I had finished speaking, he raised his head. There were

drawn lines about his mouth and in his eyes a look of suffering. My whole heart went out to him.

"Athman!" I cried.

He looked at me and his lips trembled. Then, with an obvious effort he rose to his feet.

He moved towards the door. With his hand upon the curtain he paused; then, turning quickly, he recrossed to my side. I gazed at him in surprise, for his eyes rested on me with unaccustomed tenderness.

"Sidi," he began, then stopped.

"Yes, Athman, what is it?"

"Sidi, I wish to thank you."

"There is no need."

"Ah, but there is. You have been so kind. No one has ever been so kind to me before. Sidi, I am ashamed. I ask your pardon. Oh, *mon Dieu!* to think that I—I even tried to *kill you!*"

His voice sank to a whisper of horror.

"Never speak of it again," I cried hastily.

His look of gratitude was touching to witness.

"Sidi," he continued, "I wish so much that I could do something—could give you something—but I have nothing."

He made a little despairing gesture with his hands. The candle-light flashing on his ring drew his attention to it; he paused as if struck by a sudden idea, glanced hesitatingly at me, then slowly withdrew it from his finger. For awhile he rubbed it against his sleeve until the worn silver shone again; then wistfully and as if apologising for its unworthiness offered it to me.

"For my sake," he said simply, "please take it, Sidi. It will make me happy to think that you wear something to remind you of me when I am far away."

I looked at the common little ring with its blue glass stone, then took it from him.

"Thank you, Athman," I said.

Momentary pleasure shone in his face. His lips opened as though he would speak, but no sound escaped them. Then, his eyes resting on me to the last, he passed slowly from the room.

CHAPTER XLIV.

FATE.

My window glimmered with the wan light of dawn. For long I lay thinking, my thoughts reverting with thankfulness to the events of the preceding day. The anxiety of the past few weeks had been lifted completely from my mind. With pleasure I recollected that in three hours at most we were to start upon our return journey to Biskra.

Gradually the light increased. The air that wandered in at the open window breathed of a world full of the freshness of a new day—a world of peace, and joy, and hope.

Suddenly, breaking upon the quiet came the sound of a voice.

“Sidi ! Sidi !” it cried.

It is impossible to exaggerate the startling effect of this voice rending the silence with pent-up excitement. There was something strangely ominous in the sound. In haste I sprang towards the window. In the shadow of the courtyard below, Embareck danced from one foot to another.

“Sidi ! Sidi ! Sidi !” He continued to reiterate the word in a high falsetto voice, as though his dis-

tracted brain could find no other vent for expression.

"I am here," I shouted. "What is the matter?"

"Alouï!" he screamed, gesticulating towards the lane.

"What of him?" I cried; then as he continued to wave his arms: "Speak!" I shouted. "Speak!"

"Alouï has left us."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Yes," he wailed, "I feared it. I knew his great heart. I was sure that once upon the trail he would not abandon it. This morning he left the house while it was yet dark. I tracked him. From the city walls I saw him holding converse with the servant of the Si-Abdelmoummen—he who is in charge of the racing camel."

"Racing camel!" I gasped.

"Even as thou sayest, Sidi. By Allah! his intention is plain. On such a speedy beast——"

But I heard no more. Before he had made an end of speaking, I was away. Dressing hurriedly, I hastened towards the city-gates, my one thought being to arrive ere it was too late. The distance was considerable, but at that early hour the sunless lanes were deserted; only at times some drowsy figure stretched under a wall turned wondering eyes in my direction.

Arrived at the gates I passed into open ground—the town at my back, the desert before me. With anxious eyes I gazed around. The sand beneath the wall still bore the impress of the camel's feet, but the animal itself was no longer there, for as I

swept the scene I caught sight of Athman mounted on its lofty hump moving across the level spaces beyond. They had but that moment started—they were I felt convinced still within earshot.

"Athman!" I shouted.

He did not look back, neither did he slacken speed; and yet it seemed to me that one of his arms raised for a moment then reluctantly let fall, told of the farewell he longed yet feared to wave.

In my excitement I called again, putting the full force of my lungs into the cry. The ineffectual sound sank before the immensities that lay around, only its echo returned, baffled, in sad reverberations from the ruined walls. Athman still held on his way.

Upon my right rose a hill of sand. Climbing its shifting slopes, I stood motionless on the summit—every energy concentrated in the sense of vision I could see him better now—the familiar figure in the red fez and blue burnous swaying to the movement of the camel that was bearing him swiftly towards the South. More than once he bent low above the outstretched neck, and I saw that he was urging the great white creature to its topmost speed. Behind them, the sand flung backward resembled clouds of dust trailed low along the ground.

All at once the rim of the sun rose above the horizon. The desert awoke to life. The change awed the imagination. The light possessed a strange and almost supernatural quality, lurid as the dawn of some unearthly day. Desolate spaces leapt into

animation, shouting the luminous tidings from misty horizon to misty horizon, back, and back, and back, over the vast circumference of the globe, back to the great lonely heart of the Sahara.

With the dawn of light awoke the dawn of allure-ment. The unseen made itself felt, veiled in liquid heat that quivered like the breath of a furnace. The mysterious something that lay beyond pulled at the heart-strings.

Athman was far off now, a phantom figure mounted on a phantom camel skirting a sand-hill. Fixedly I strained my eyes, fearful lest should I avert them even for a moment I might not again catch sight of the receding point of life that dwindled into the distance.

As I watched him the infinite depths into which he was vanishing assumed a new and strange significance. Their loveliness remained incontestable, yet their sinister possibilities struck a chill over the spirit. They too appeared to be watching him, but with no kindly feelings—to be putting forth all their siren powers—to be luring him to his fate.

Smaller and ever smaller he grew, till at length he was but a speck in the distance. Before him stretched a sea of restless light ; into this he melted slowly ; for awhile he appeared to swim in its waters, then suddenly they closed over him and though I strained my eyes, I saw him no more.

The silence remained unbroken, yet through the breathless air came the call of an inaudible voice. It was as if this dread and mighty thing mocked at me standing there in my loneliness. With a

shudder I recognised the summons of the desert—the summons that was one with the music, one with the dancer—the summons that Athman in the happy days of his ignorance had named “The Voice of the South.”

THE END.



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taken from the Building**

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